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Original Research Article

Understanding Regeneration Failure by Examining the Gap Between Urban Planners' Theories and the Real Issues Governing Informal Settlements (A Case Study of Camp B, Bandar Imam Khomeini)

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ABSTRACT

Informal settlements, as one of the complex urban challenges in Iran, require approaches that go beyond traditional and physical interventions. Focusing on the informal settlement of Camp B (Shahid Sabbaghan Town) in Bandar Imam Khomeini, this research dissects the systemic reasons for the failure of regeneration projects in this area. The research method is grounded in grounded theory and deep content analysis of interviews with three groups of key actors (state officials, experts, and residents), alongside frequency analysis to assess the thematic weight of each category. Findings indicate that the core of the crisis lies not in implementation issues but in deep managerial roots. Based on frequency analysis, the category of inefficient governance and detachment from context, with 41 open codes, was identified as the most central dimension of failure. This includes deficiencies in initial diagnosis, a top-down approach, and the elimination of public participation, which together provided the underlying ground for failure. In second place, multidimensional destructive consequences, with 25 open codes, emerged, among which "physical destruction," with 11 codes, was the most evident outcome of this inefficiency. Interestingly, the category of paradigm shift necessity (10 open codes) had greater frequency than "erosive processes" (9 open codes), indicating a strong inclination among stakeholders toward fundamental change. The paper concludes that the project's failure is essentially a paradigmatic crisis linked to the prevailing governance model. Therefore, any effective future intervention must go beyond purely technical solutions and focus on reforming the governance model toward a participatory, context-sensitive, and people-centered approach.

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Introduction

Urban poverty and inequality, as consequences of unbalanced development (Tavallaei et al., 2014), manifest in the form of informal settlements with multifaceted physical, social, and economic challenges. The Camp B neighborhood (Shahid Sabbaghan Town) in Bandar Imam Khomeini is a prominent example of such settlements. The initial formation of this neighborhood dates back to the 1960s, with the settlement of port workers and expanded with the arrival of wartime migrants and job-seekers (Mandān Consulting Engineers, 2009). Despite multiple upgrading schemes implemented by institutions such as the Housing Foundation, these actions have not achieved sustainable and acceptable outcomes due to a lack of deep understanding of the complex and wicked nature of "informality" and the adoption of traditional, top-down approaches. The neighborhood is currently trapped in a persistent cycle of deprivation observable across various dimensions. In infrastructure, there is no piped gas network, the wastewater system is dysfunctional, drinking water quality is low, and streets are unpaved and lack lighting. In housing, low construction quality and resilience, absence of formal title deeds, and vulnerability to natural hazards are the main issues. The neighborhood also suffers from severe shortages of public services and cultural, recreational, health-care, and educational uses, culminating in deep social and economic challenges such as high unemployment that complete this multidimensional deprivation. Given that existing research lacks deep, systematic studies focusing on the challenges of a specific neighborhood in a port-industrial city, this study aims to fill that gap. The main objective is a precise analysis of the problem system of the Camp B informal settlement and to provide problem-driven strategies that, unlike traditional, linear, goal-driven approaches, leverage field analysis and a problem-tree to create a basis for place-based and participatory development planning.

Theoretical Framework

Informal settlements are among the most significant challenges of cities in developing countries and represent the spatial reflection of poverty, inequality, and the inefficiency of economic, social, and managerial structures (UN-Habitat, 2003; Hadizadeh Bazaz, 2003). This phenomenon has deep repercussions not only in physical and service dimensions but also in social and economic domains, requiring a comprehensive approach for understanding and management. According to UN-Habitat, informal settlements are areas where residents lack security of tenure and are typically deprived of basic urban services such as safe water, sanitation, electricity, access roads, and solid waste management (UN-Habitat, 2003). In the Iranian literature, this phenomenon is also known by terms such as "marginalization," "squatter settlements," or "inefficient urban fabrics" (Sarrafi, 2003; Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003).

Key characteristics of these settlements include:

- Low and unstable construction quality and building materials.
- High residential and household density per housing unit.
- Lack of urban infrastructure and essential services (water, electricity, sewerage, transportation).
- Tenure insecurity and absence of formal title deeds.
- Informal economy and unstable incomes.
- Social exclusion and multiple social harms (UN-Habitat, 2003; Kazemian, 2014).

The formation of informal settlements results from the intersection of structural and individual factors. At the macro level, rapid urbanization, rural-to-urban migration, the concentration of economic opportunities in cities, and the inability of formal housing markets to meet demand from low-income groups underlie the emergence of these settlements (UN-Habitat, 2003; Hadizadeh Bazaz, 2003). In Iran, accelerated urbanization in recent decades, weak urban management and planning, cumbersome regulations, and a lack of planned land and affordable housing provision for low-income groups have been major drivers of this phenomenon (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003; Lotfi et al., 2010).

The emergence of informal settlements is thus the product of a set of structural failures across different levels. This phenomenon cannot be attributed solely to the individual decisions of migrants; rather, it should be understood as the spatial manifestation of a deeper crisis in urban planning and management systems. At the macro level, rapid urbanization and large-scale rural-to-urban migration arising from unbalanced development policies and the concentration of economic opportunities in urban centers create the first wave of housing demand. At the urban scale, poverty and income inequality prevent a large segment of this population from entering the formal housing market. Here, the failure of formal land and housing markets and the inefficiency of policy-making and urban management play a key role. Governments and municipalities are often unable to anticipate this volume of demand and to provide land and affordable housing.

Under such conditions, the informal settlement emerges as a bottom-up "solution" to a top-down "problem." Low-income and marginalized groups, to meet their most vital need shelter turn to informal land occupation and construction on lands neglected by the formal market. Therefore, this is not a free "choice," but a "compulsion" stemming from the concurrent failure of macroeconomic structures, the urban market, and the governance system. This analytical framework shifts the lens on residents from "lawbreakers" to "victims of a dysfunctional

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system," paving the way for supportive and empowering policies.

Informality is not merely a pathology or deviation, but a bottom-up response to the failures of formal urban structures. For many residents, informal housing is a survival strategy and the only option for securing shelter (UN-Habitat, 2003). Despite their multiple problems, these settlements often possess significant social networks and social capital that help residents cope with hardships (Kazemian, 2014) (Table 1).

Literature Review

To gain a deep understanding of the dimensions of failure in the regeneration project in Camp B, it is essential to review the relevant theoretical and empirical foundations of this field. Table 2 presents the key findings and central focus of major sources that form the foundation of this research.

Research Method

This study aimed at conducting a deep, multidimensional analysis of the problem system of the Camp B informal settlement using a qualitative case study to understand the complex nature of poverty and informality. The primary data analysis method was carried out using grounded theory. Interviews were conducted with 14 key actors (managers, professionals, and residents) until theoretical saturation was achieved. To understand the historical context, upstream documents such as the master plan (Mandān Consulting Engineers, 2009) and national regeneration documents (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003; Iran Urban Regeneration Company, 2018) were also content-analyzed. The qualitative data analysis included three stages: open coding (extracting initial concepts), axial coding (deriving 12 main categories), and selective coding (constructing the final model around four core categories). Finally, frequency analysis was employed to add quantitative credibility to the findings by moving beyond traditional top-down approaches (Zali et al., 2016). In doing so, the study attempted to arrive at a problem-driven analysis grounded in field evidence.

Case Study

The Camp B neighborhood is situated in the southwestern sector of the city of Bandar-e Imam Khomeini, Khuzestan Province, within Municipal Region 1, Subdistrict 3. Its genesis dates to the 1960s, coinciding with the construction of port facilities. Initial settlement took place through worker housing particularly Japanese workers accommodated in prefabricated cabins followed by the influx of war-displaced populations and job-seeking migrants, collectively underpinning the emergence of the neighborhood.

• Climatic characteristics and natural hazards

The area exhibits a hot-humid climate characterized by high atmospheric moisture and limited convective rainfall. Low-permeability soils and minimal surface gradients produce a heightened risk of waterlogging and pluvial flooding, while low elevations (3.5-5 meters above sea level) exacerbate vulnerability. A deficit of green space diminishes microclimatic comfort. Although the region occupies a low seismic hazard zone, the poor quality of building stock increases the likelihood of damage under moderate earthquake shaking.

• Demographic characteristics

Census data indicate population growth alongside a reduction in household size, signaling increased density and shifts in household structure. Youth (ages 15–29) constitute a substantial share of residents, representing both a potential labor supply and heightened demand for social services. High in-migration has fostered ethnic and cultural diversity. Concurrently, economic participation rates

Table 1. Comparative Table of Key Indicators (International Framework and Iran).

Indicator	International definition (UN-Habitat)	Instances in Iran	Sources
Tenure security	Absence of legal rights over land and housing	Lack of formal deeds, deed-of-sale ownership	(UN-Habitat, 2003; Lotfi et al., 2010)
Housing quality	Unstable structures and poor-quality materials	Low-durability buildings and substandard materials	(UN-Habitat, 2003; Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003)
Access to safe water	Lack of safe piped water	Informal water networks and illegal connections.	(UN-Habitat, 2003; Lotfi et al., 2010)
Access to sanitation	Lack of sewerage and sanitary facilities	Traditional disposal systems and sewage discharge	(UN-Habitat, 2003; Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2003)
Urban services	Lack of electricity, gas, transport, schools, and healthcare	Shortage of educational and health services; unpaved streets	(UN-Habitat, 2003; Kazemian, 2014)
Social dimensions	Social exclusion, insecurity, and lack of public spaces	Weak social capital and multiple social harms	(UN-Habitat, 2003; Gholamreza Kazemian, 2014)
Economic dimensions	Unemployment, informal economy, unstable income	Precarious jobs, unemployment, widespread poverty	(UN-Habitat, 2003; Hadizadeh Bazaz, 2003)

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Table 2. Comparative table of principal sources.

Source	Main focus of the article/report	Key finding or linkage to the present study
UN-Habitat (2003)	Definition and global challenge of informal settlements	Defines these settlements with indicators such as lack of tenure security and deprivation from basic services, presenting them as a global challenge.
Satterthwaite (2001)	Multifaceted challenges of urban poverty	Emphasizes complex physical, social, economic, and environmental dimensions of these areas and their relation to poverty.
Sarrafi (2008)	Good urban governance and in-situ upgrading	Introduces "in-situ upgrading" as an effective approach within the framework of good governance to organize these areas.
Zali et al. (2016)	Practical critique of empowerment projects in Iran	Demonstrates, via case study, the deep gap between declared participatory policies and actual top-down performance in Iranian upgrading projects.
Ebekozien et al. (2024)	Integrated urban regeneration	Explains urban regeneration as a holistic model requiring participation of all stakeholders to realize sustainable development.
Askani and Hosseini Amini (2009)	Consequences of exclusionary policies	Notes the negative outcomes of coercive and clearance approaches in past decades, such as intensified poverty and social disintegration.
Kazemian and Shafi'a, (2014)	Social capital in informal neighborhoods	Highlights the importance of social networks and social capital in these settlements for coping with hardship despite physical deficits.
Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (2003)	National Empowerment Document	As an early upstream document, it emphasizes principles such as the facilitative role of the state and the right to reside, forming the formal policy framework.
Iran Urban Regeneration Company (2018)	National Urban Regeneration Document	Represents the official regeneration discourse in Iran with a comprehensive view of inefficient fabrics, emphasizing participation, empowerment, and integrated management.
Denaldi & Cardoso (2021)	Evaluation of large-scale policies in Brazil	Provides an example of "sites-and-services" policy analysis where the state served as facilitator and infrastructure provider.
Stiphany et al. (2024)	Evolution of upgrading approaches	Confirms the global shift from clearance toward participatory and integrated policies for upgrading informal settlements.

below the citywide average and elevated unemployment (over 25%, reaching up to 30% among women) point to significant structural constraints.

• Housing

The neighborhood covers approximately 50 hectares, of which 33% is designated for residential use. The urban fabric is fine-grained, with small parcels and predominantly low-durability, two-story buildings constructed of brick with jack-arch systems. More than 95% of structures are assessed as requiring rehabilitation, and the absence of formal land titles constitutes a principal impediment to upgrading. Partially completed Housing Foundation buildings have further exacerbated existing dysfunctions.

• Land use and services

Approximately 40% of land remains vacant; rights-of-way comprise 20%, while public services account for only 6%. There are acute deficits in cultural, health, policing, and recreational services; only a single health center and a limited number of schools are available.

• Infrastructure and thoroughfares

The neighborhood faces challenges, including unhygienic wastewater disposal via open channels, limited gas distribution network coverage, substandard drinking water quality, improper solid waste collection, and environmental pollution. Internal streets are often unpaved and unlit, and segregation of vehicular and pedestrian flows is not observed, reducing traffic safety (Fig. 1).

Findings

Using grounded analysis and in-depth interviews with key actors (governmental, experts, and residents), the article dissects an unsuccessful urban regeneration project. First, three stages of open, axial, and selective coding were undertaken, followed by analysis of each of the four selective codes based on the axial and open codes, and then a quantitative analysis of codes based on the counts of open codes (Table 3).

• Inefficient governance and detachment from context

roots of a foreseeable failure. The foundation of the project's failure lies in a dysfunctional governance



Fig.1. Images of the neighborhood, the incomplete Housing Foundation building, improper waste collection, and inadequate basic and superstructure infrastructure. Source: Authors.

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model fundamentally detached from the context it sought to intervene in. This detachment is traceable across six layers: first, the pathology of the initial diagnosis and baseline study shows the project began without a sound understanding of the identity, needs, and dynamics of the fabric. This ignorance stemmed from a dominant top-down approach and institutional unilateralism that reduced the role of people and eliminated participation. This approach, in turn, was fueled by a vulnerable legal structure that enabled buck-passing and a lack of accountability. At a deeper level, governance was influenced by an abstract, engineering-centered gaze that ignored the organic fabric and ultimately operated in conflict with the logic of industrial development and urban life. This intertwined set of factors formed a governance ecosystem in which failure was the natural outcome.

• Erosive processes and implementation inefficiency

The stalled machine of development. The dysfunctional governance model directly led to flawed and erosive implementation processes, manifesting in two key domains. On one side, the inefficiency of financial and credit mechanisms characterized by insufficient facilities and cumbersome banking conditions effectively deprived residents of the financial capacity to build. On the other hand, disruption in the management system and erosive bureaucracy with long cycles of loan allocation and the shuffling of responsibilities among institutions wasted the remaining limited capacities in administrative corridors. These two defective processes shut down the project's engine and turned it into a stalled and failed machine.

• Multidimensional destructive consequences: the bitter harvest

The logical outcome of context-detached governance and erosive processes could only be catastrophic results across multiple dimensions. Negative economic consequences due to delay and inflation left people with mountains of debt and half-finished assets, reproducing poverty among them. Physical destruction and the production of inefficient spaces turned the urban landscape into a "wounded morphology" comprising defenseless and identity-less spaces that robbed residents of their sense of belonging. Ultimately, the heaviest blow came in the form of social and human consequences: displacement, desperation, confusion, and the collapse of social capital were the legacy this project left for the local community.

• Necessity of a paradigm shift toward people-centered development

The only way out. Faced with this multidimensional devastation, actors and experts arrive at a shared conclusion: repeating this cycle is impossible, and a fundamental change is required. Presenting alternative solutions and a paradigm shift is not a choice but a necessity. Concepts such as "empowerment" instead of direct intervention, "surgical" or incremental interventions instead of clearance, and "place-based development" instead of abstract plans all rest on a single principle: returning "people" to the center of the development process. This shift means moving from development "for" people to development "with" people and is the only plausible path to break the cycle of past failures (Fig. 2)(Fig. 3).

• Inefficient governance and detachment from context: the core of the crisis (total: 41 open codes)

With 41 open codes, this category is by far the most weighted and central dimension of failure from the perspective of actors. The high frequency clearly indicates that, for interviewees, the roots of all problems lie not in implementation details but in a deep crisis at the level of governance and the dominant paradigm guiding the project. Subcategories such as "pathology of the initial diagnosis" (9 codes), "dominance of a top-down approach" (8 codes), and "elimination of participation" (8 codes) all emphasize a fundamental detachment between the leading institution and contextual realities. This high quantitative weight rejects any analysis based on "minor mistakes" and points directly to the macro managerial structure and the ruling paradigm.

• Multidimensional destructive consequences the tangible experience of failure (total: 25 open codes)

The second most frequent category, with 25 open

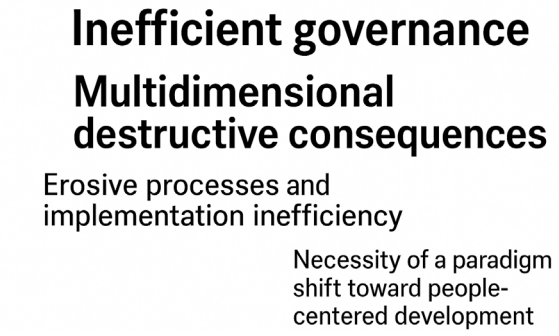


Fig. 2. Selective coding

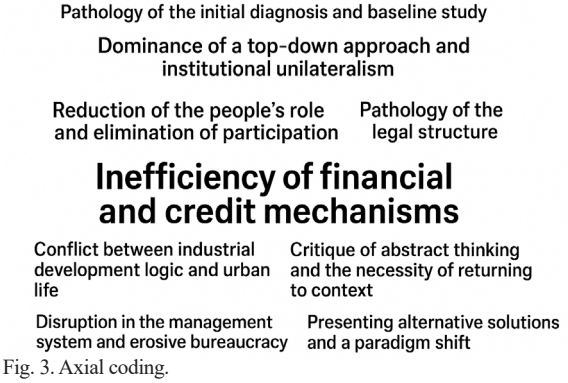


Fig. 3. Axial coding.

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codes, concerns project outcomes. This shows that, after a root-level critique of the governance model, the greatest concern of actors is the tangible and destructive results experienced in their lives and environment. An especially important point is the exceptional frequency of the subcategory "physical destruction and production of inefficient spaces," with 11 open codes, which makes it the most frequent axial code across the entire study. This key finding indicates that physical and morphological wounds on the city (defenseless spaces, lifeless fabric, infrastructure crisis) are the most visible and painful shared experience of this failure.

• Necessity of a paradigm shift: the strong echo of hope and solutions (total: 10 open codes)

Perhaps the most surprising quantitative finding is that the "paradigm shift" category, with 10 open codes, exceeds "implementation processes" in frequency. This means that actors not only criticized the status quo but also actively and repeatedly voiced alternative solutions and the necessity of a fundamental change. This notable frequency shows that, from stakeholders' perspectives, the solution is not to patch the broken machine but to build an entirely new one based on people-centered development, empowerment, and genuine participation.

• Erosive processes and implementation inefficiency the intermediary machine of failure (total: 9 open codes)

This category, with 9 open codes, has the lowest frequency among the four selective codes. This does not mean that financial inefficiency or bureaucracy is unimportant; rather, it shows that, for actors, these issues were not the main "cause" but the "effects" and intermediating mechanisms through which dysfunctional governance led to destructive outcomes. The lesser focus on this section indicates that stakeholders correctly seek the roots of the problem in deeper paradigmatic and managerial layers, not in purely operational mechanisms (Table 4).

Discussion

The analyses provide a clear narrative of project failure that could not have been reached through logical analysis alone. They show that the story of this failure is the story of a governance crisis (with 41 codes) that led to destructive outcomes (with 25 codes), especially physical destruction (with 11 codes). Against this darkness stands a powerful alternative discourse for a paradigm shift (with 10 codes), whose importance surpasses that of implementation processes (with 9 codes).

Accordingly, the final thesis of the article, supported by both qualitative logic and the quantitative weight of the data, is as follows: the failure of urban regeneration projects in Iran is essentially a governance crisis, and any meaningful solution must begin with reforming this governance model. Policymakers and planners should abandon an exclusive focus on technical and purely financial solutions (which had the lowest frequency among stakeholders' concerns) and instead devote energy to rethinking the development paradigm, opening space for genuine participation, reforming the legal structure, and creating responsive, context-sensitive, and people-centered governance. The weight of the data indicates that this is what people's voices emphasize; ignoring this loud voice will only reproduce cycles of failure in the future (Fig. 4), (Fig. 5).

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the failure of the Camp B regeneration project is rooted in an "inefficient and context-detached governance" model produced by "structural failures" and a top-down approach. The study reveals a deep gap between the official policy discourse in such documents as the National Urban Regeneration Document, which emphasizes participation, and the actual performance of institutions that, as in the cases of Shiraz and Zahedan, revert to traditional approaches. Frequency analysis confirms this result: "governance" is the most frequent concern of actors (with 41 codes) and "physical destruction" its most tangible outcome. Ultimately, the research concludes that this failure is the predictable consequence of a paradigmatic crisis in the governance model, leading to destructive economic, social, and physical outcomes. Accordingly, policy recommendations rest on a paradigm shift that includes changing the role of the state from "executor" to "facilitator," institutionalizing genuine participation, adopting gradual and context-based approaches (so-called "urban surgery"), and focusing on legal-economic solutions such as issuing title deeds.

Conflict of Interest

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

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Table 4. Frequency table of selective and axial codes

Selective code	Axial coding	Count of open codes
1. Inefficient governance and detachment from context	1) Pathology of the initial diagnosis and baseline study	9
	2) Dominance of a top-down approach and institutional unilateralism	8
	3) Reduction of the people's role and elimination of participation	8
	9) Pathology of the legal structure	5
	10) Conflict between industrial development logic and urban life	5
	11) Critique of abstract thinking and the necessity of returning to context	6
2. Erosive processes and implementation inefficiency	4) Inefficiency of financial and credit mechanisms	5
	6) Disruption in the management system and erosive bureaucracy	4
3. Multidimensional destructive consequences	5) Negative economic outcomes due to delay and inflation	7
	7) Physical destruction and production of inefficient spaces	11
	8) Social and human consequences of the plan	7
4. Necessity of a paradigm shift toward people-centered development	12) Presenting alternative solutions and a paradigm shift	10

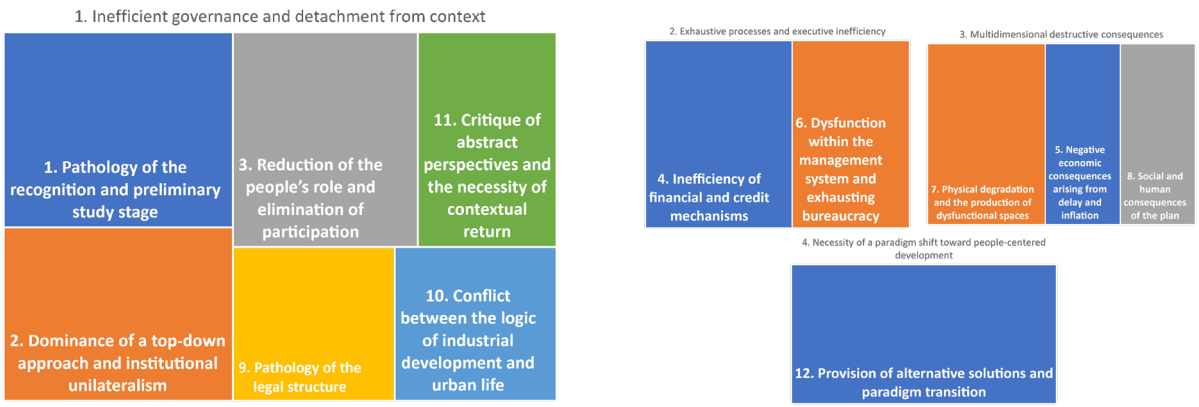


Fig.4. Selective code

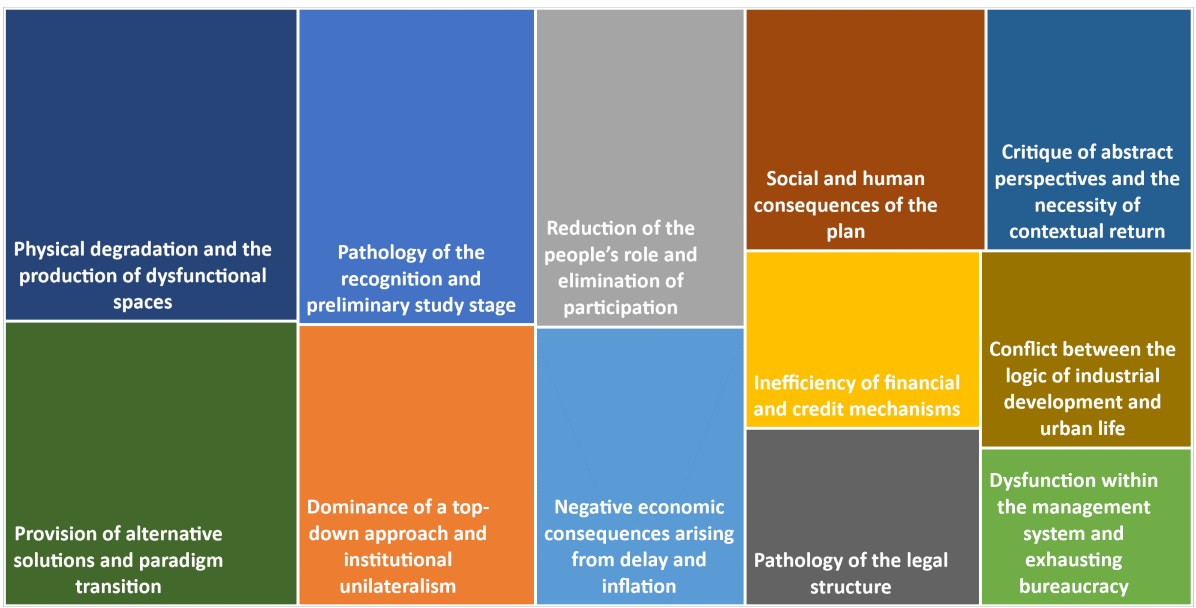


Fig. 5. Axial coding.

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