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Original Research Article

"The Secure Core of the Neighborhood" as a Catalyst for the Regeneration of the "Worn-Out Fabric of Qom" from the Perspective of Its Particularity*

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ABSTRACT

The relative advantages of Iran's urban fabrics constitute an issue that has received limited attention in the process of regenerating worn-out fabrics, both in qualitative terms and in quantitative dimensions such as the explication of deterioration indices. The city of Qom, as one of the historic cities endowed with religious value, has not remained immune, by virtue of its historical legacy, from the inevitable affliction of deterioration. However, field findings indicate that the worn-out fabric of Qom, from the perspective of its particularities, including the continuity of the flow of life within the landscape of the historic fabric unfolding alongside a pulsating and consolidating core such as the shrine at its center and, consequently, the elevated status of dwelling and the value-laden space for living, has provided a high degree of residential permanence. From this standpoint, the worn-out fabric of Qom has been less subject to transformation and out-migration of its resident community. On the other hand, neighborhood urban thoroughfares, within which social life once actively flowed, have today been overtaken by automobiles; this condition has rendered their active communicative social urban function ineffective, while the provision of the necessary parking for these vehicles has itself become a Gordian knot within the regeneration process. Therefore, the contemporary need of Qom is regeneration grounded in an approach based on systemic thinking, requiring a strategic, holistic, and non-sectoral program capable of reviving the flow of life within the historic fabric, in both its corporeal and non-corporeal dimensions, alongside contemporary inhabitation.This study, relying on the characteristics of the "Secure Neighborhood Core Theory," seeks to explicate this theory within the worn-out and deterioration-prone fabrics of Qom, with attention to their particularities. From this perspective, the Secure Neighborhood Core Theory, conceived as a multifunctional space, acts as a multifaceted solution in activating the regeneration cycle. In such a way that, on one hand, it facilitates the provision of necessary parking for newly constructed units within the regeneration process, and on the other hand, by liberating thoroughfares from the constraints of automobiles, it restores the perception of urban life to the spatial organization of the city, enhancing the quality of active habitation in Qom's urban fabrics. Consequently, regeneration of the worn-out fabric, grounded in this theory, will ensure the continuity of identity and recognition of the central residential fabrics and the accurate perception of the city by Qom's citizens.

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Introduction

The evolutionary course of cities and their urban fabrics, and the settlement of human communities within them, while providing a foundation for habitation, has also entailed the phenomenon of deterioration under the influence of the temporal factor. This has been a consistent principle throughout the history of human settlement, with human societies traditionally prioritizing the preservation and maintenance of their living environment over other matters. Consequently, with the expansion of cities and the emergence of new forms of habitation, traditional urban fabrics, due to factors such as high density, lack of necessary infrastructure, and incompatibility with contemporary urban living conditions, have entered a process of deterioration. Worn-out urban fabric can be considered a segment of the urban space whose living structure, both in terms of construction and the performance of vital components, has become disrupted and inefficient. Accordingly, a new body of literature in the field of urban restoration has emerged, gradually consolidating its foundations over the years, with the common objective of preserving and revitalizing the "traditional and historic urban fabrics" of cities.

In Iran, the establishment of institutions such as the Renovation Organization and the Urban Development and Improvement Organization (Mansouri, 2020) within urban management bodies reflects a continuation of this perspective.

The inevitability of deterioration in urban fabrics, alongside legal regulations and requirements, has created constraints that have affected the vitality of these fabrics. These directives, rather than actively facilitating the activation of the regeneration cycle, have often resulted in the stagnation of the urban regeneration process in the country's cities.

Research Method

The present study is applied in nature and employs a descriptive-analytical method. The research was conducted in two stages using both library studies and field observations. In the first stage, the theoretical literature of the study was examined through documentary research, leading to the extraction of the primary research data. In parallel, the authors' field observations and investigations clarified the particularity components of the city of Qom. Subsequently, the analysis of these components was conducted through comparison with the solutions proposed in the Secure Neighborhood Core Theory.

Problem Statement and Research Question

Considering the definitions of worn-out and inefficient urban fabrics and their intersection with natural hazards, the concept of regeneration and actions toward it should be regarded as one of the urgent measures of urban management. However, not only is this action absent in the will of the responsible institutions, but obstacles such as the requirement to provide parking as a prerequisite for the issuance of building permits in worn-out fabrics, as well as the limitation on maximum land use in fine-grained parcels, have led to the stagnation of regeneration. Although this issue in the city of Qom has recently gained renewed momentum through the efforts of the Organization for Beautification, Improvement, and Renovation around the Holy Shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma (PBUH), it still remains far from the ideal process. Therefore, the present study seeks to answer the question: "Despite the particularities of the city of Qom -which can be considered a relative advantage compared to other cities in Iran- what factor(s) hinder the acceleration of regeneration in Qom's worn-out urban fabrics, and what strategies can stimulate and expedite the regeneration process in these fabrics?

Research Goal

The objective of this paper is to examine the causes of inefficiency in the regeneration of the central worn-out urban fabric of Qom, with an emphasis on the necessity of rescue actions based on natural hazards as threatening factors. On the other hand, the specific characteristics of Qom which in this study are referred to as the particularity or relative advantage of the worn-out urban fabric have created unique conditions within the city's worn-out fabric, resulting in a high level of resident life flow and preventing its transformation into a migrant-receiving fabric. The preservation of the authenticity of the neighborhood concept has increased the potential for neighborhood-centered and participatory strategies, strategies that in practice lead to solutions that both accelerate the regeneration process and maintain the neighborhood's authenticity and life flow. Additionally, these strategies effectively contribute to safeguarding residents against urban physical destruction resulting from natural hazards.

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Significance of the Issue

In worn-out urban fabrics, structural weakness and physical instability, as one of the primary criteria of deterioration, in conjunction with natural hazards such as earthquakes and ground subsidence, create serious crises. According to official statistics, out of 13,000 hectares of the urban area of Qom, 1,600 hectares are designated as worn-out fabric and 315 hectares as historic urban fabric, accommodating a population of approximately 290,000 people [equivalent to 30% of Qom's population] and 120,000 unstable buildings (Zarei, 2024). Additionally, official reports identify ground subsidence and earthquakes as the principal natural hazards in Qom (Is Qom…, 2024), due to the city's proximity to 11 faults such as Qamroud, Khezr, Shadgholi, Dochah, and Qizghaleh (Ehteshami Moeinabadi, 2015) (Fig. 1). Therefore, urgent action and the necessity of rescue measures, alongside the provision of theoretical and practical solutions for Qom's worn-out urban fabric, are presented as essential.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

• Worn-out Urban Fabric

Various definitions of worn-out urban fabric exist in the theoretical literature. Urban worn-out fabrics are neighborhoods within the urban space that possess their own social, economic, and cultural complexities and characteristics. On one hand, these neighborhoods and fabrics have valuable residential roots enriched with cultural, social, and architectural significance; on the other hand, due to severe deterioration, lack of adequate access to urban and health services, social and security problems, vulnerability to earthquakes, floods, and fires, as well as incompatibility with contemporary urban life and modern urban planning, they face superstructural and infrastructural challenges (What is deteriorated…, 2014).

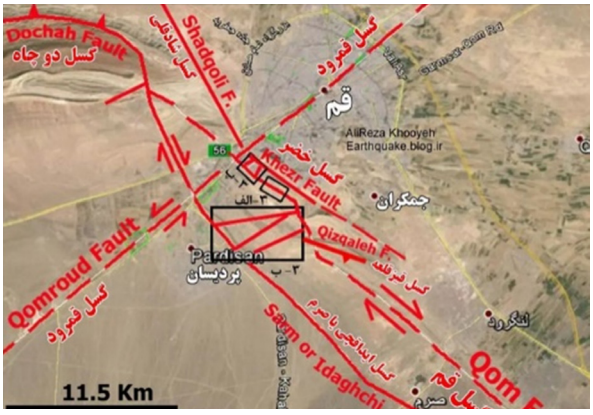

Fig. 1. Faults adjacent to the city of Qom. Source: Is Qom…, 2024.

Worn-out and inefficient urban fabrics are areas of the city in which, over the years, their constituent elements -including superstructure and infrastructure, buildings, constructions, streets, and access routes- have deteriorated and become inefficient. Residents of these areas suffer from multiple economic, social, cultural, and physical problems (Iranian Parliament Research Center, 2019) and are prone to vulnerability, socially characterized by low spatial, environmental, economic, and social value (Ghasemi Siani & Haqi, 2019).

Such fabrics, due to their lagging behind the evolutionary cycle of habitation, experience deterioration in various dimensions of their constituent elements, including both the physical fabric and activities. Since the transformative forces within these fabrics lack the power and speed necessary to align themselves with other parts of the city, these fabrics inevitably adopt a regressive trajectory and progressively fall behind the dynamic urban development cycle (Ibid.).

Accordingly, indicators have been established to delineate these fabrics. Based on these indicators and the definition of worn-out fabrics by the High Council of Architecture and Urban Planning in 2005, three criteria were selected for determining the boundaries of urban worn-out fabrics: fine-grained blocks (blocks in which more than 50% of the parcels have an area of less than 200 square meters), unstable blocks (blocks in which more than 50% of the buildings are unstable and lack a structural system), and impermeable blocks (blocks in which more than 50% of the passages are less than six meters wide) (Haeri, 2007, p. 10).

Additionally, an unstable fabric is defined as a block in which at least 50% of the buildings are non-resistant, including houses without concrete or steel frames, which have no dynamic resistance against earthquakes (Mansouri, 2014).

However, the incorrect definition of deterioration and its indicators in the Iranian regeneration literature has contributed to the failure of urban regeneration. The indicators defined by the High Council of Urban Planning and Architecture (2005) for identifying worn-out fabrics -fine-grained blocks, instability, and impermeability- focus solely on the physical fabric and lack the necessary scientific and professional justification. Any

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building or fabric that is unstable, regardless of size or street width, is certainly deteriorated due to the absence of safety. Conversely, a fabric composed of small buildings is not necessarily worn-out, and street width is not inherently an indicator of deterioration (Mansouri, 2014).

One of the consequences of deterioration is the accelerated pace of spatial and physical changes in cities, which leads to the abandonment of residential units, the disappearance of activities, physical decay, social decline, reduced vitality, and economic deterioration. When this process enters historic and cultural fabrics, it assumes even more serious dimensions because the deterioration of these fabrics endangers the historical and cultural identity of the city (Bahrami et al., 2022). In response, the regeneration process has been proposed as a strategy to counteract deterioration.

• Regeneration

According to the National Strategic Document for the Revival, Improvement, Regeneration, and Empowerment of Worn-out and Inefficient Urban Fabrics (2014), regeneration is defined as a comprehensive process from economic–social, cultural, and physical perspectives aimed at restoring suitable living conditions based on new interactions and achieving a dynamic balance within target areas and neighborhoods (National Strategic Document for the Revival, Improvement, Regeneration, and Empowerment of Worn-out and Inefficient Urban Fabrics, 2014).

Regeneration is also defined as the renewal of buildings and urban spaces, which, through interventions, eliminates signs of deterioration, ruin, stagnation, and inactivity (Ghasemi Siani & Haqi, 2019) and restores vitality to a building or space with an emphasis on reshaping the urban space or complex (Shammai & Pourahmad, 2006).

From a practical perspective, regeneration occurs when an urban space, complex, or building possesses appropriate and contemporary functionality, but relative physical-spatial deterioration has reduced its efficiency and performance. Regeneration encompasses a set of actions that, while preserving the building, complex, or historic urban space, modernize the corresponding spatial organization and enable its optimal performance (Tavasoli, 1999). It should be noted that in urban regeneration, the goal is not merely the physical–structural reconstruction of city buildings, but the renewal of the socio-cultural fabric, based on new interactions, to provide fresh vitality for present occupants, workers, and residents of historic cities (Falamaki, 2005). Urban regeneration is conceived as a permanent, dynamic, and continuous approach responsible for updating urban services and infrastructure to meet the evolving needs of residents (Mansouri, 2025).

Findings

• Worn-out Urban Fabric of Qom

More than 30% of the city's population live in worn-out urban fabrics, facing various challenges, including the decline of spatial and environmental quality, physical deterioration, and social and economic issues (Rafeian & Zahed, 2021). The worn-out fabric area of Qom encompasses four urban districts- Districts 1, 3, 6, and 7 of Qom Municipality -and, based on neighborhood divisions, includes 51 neighborhoods, some of which are not entirely within the worn-out fabric boundary, with only portions included in the designated area (Fig. 2).

In the fabric adjacent to the Jameh Mosque of Qom, a study conducted by Lorestani et al. in 2012 found that only 15% of residential units in this area were less than 30 years old. Severe fine-graining of the residential fabric in this area is considered a key issue, with 63% of parcels being under 100 square meters and 58% of the passages in this area measuring 1 to 2 meters in width. Weak accessibility and insufficient functional uses for residents, including green, recreational, and sports spaces, are additional problems of this fabric. Furthermore, 63% of residents identified the worn-out fabric and old structure as the main deficiency of the neighborhood, 84% expressed a desire for regeneration, and 93% stated that they

Fig. 2. Map of the worn-out urban fabric, central core, and historic urban fabric of Qom. Source: Authors, adapted from the Sustainable Urban Regeneration Headquarters of Qom Province, 2015.

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would be willing to continue residing in the area if regeneration occurred (Lorestani et al., 2012).

• Particularity of Qom – Relative Advantage

The formation of worn-out fabrics in city centers arises from decreased residential and recreational desirability or the dominance of intense activity over habitation. This factor leads to the depopulation of the area by original residents and the settlement of new social groups, who, due to a lack of long-term residential history and sense of belonging to the fabric, make minimal effort to maintain the neighborhood's vitality, thereby creating conditions for deterioration (Haji-Ali Akbari, 2009). Human settlements, whether in rural fabrics or urban areas, are considered the lifelines of communities, providing the primary foundation for living, social interactions, and cultural and economic development. Considering increasing challenges such as physical deterioration, demographic changes, environmental issues, and the need to preserve local identities, explicating and accurately understanding the concept of settlement revival is of special significance (Vafaei, 2025). The city of Qom, with its ancient history, during its various formation periods, like other traditional Iranian cities, initially developed around the bazaar and the Jameh Mosque, forming its primary spatial organization. In later periods, with the centrality of the Holy Shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma (PBUH), this new focal point became the nucleus of urban transformations, organizing the surrounding fabrics much like a magnet. This centrality resulted in the emergence of residential fabrics as interwoven layers around it. Therefore, the area encompassing the Holy Shrine, the bazaar, and the Jameh Mosque can be considered the center of urban fabric transformations in terms of encompassing human communities. Every human community, without the presence of individuals who have experienced living in a place and, in effect, carry their lived experience, is devoid of meaning. Lived experience, and consequently the sense of attachment to a place, is one of the main pillars of vitality in settlements. Therefore, the particularity of Qom in its central worn-out fabric can be regarded as the permanence of original residents and the ongoing life within it. Based on conducted surveys, the following reasons can be identified as the most important indicators of this permanence.

• The Shrine as a Vitalizing Element

Considering the capacities of the shrine in terms of its spiritual value and its impact on Qom's urban fabric, as well as the shrine's centrality throughout different historical periods, residents of Qom have shown a greater tendency to settle in this area. Consequently, this centrality has resulted in the majority of Qom's worn-out urban fabric being located in proximity to the shrine. Therefore, the shrine acts as a stabilizing element of life within the urban fabric, where the flow of life is noticeably higher compared to other similar fabrics. This effect is not limited to the fabrics immediately adjacent to the shrine; its influence can be observed extending into surrounding fabrics within the historic and worn-out urban areas. Due to the sanctity of the shrine, population permanence in this area has continued into recent periods, representing an additional relative advantage compared to the fabrics of other cities.

• Place Value and Prestige

Historic cities in Iran have, in fact, been cohesive and homogeneous complexes, whose spatial-physical development was influenced by their limited productive relations and socio-economic structures (Sarvar, 2019). From this perspective, the value and prestige of place constitute another advantage; in Qom, the adjacency of the urban fabric to the Holy Shrine has generated diverse social, economic, and cultural activities, helping to overcome the physical aspects of deterioration. Resident presence and the continuous activities conducted by inhabitants contribute to the creation of place value. Accordingly, given that, according to theoretical definitions, one of the reasons for deterioration from a non-physical perspective is the disappearance of activities that previously shaped the life of urban communities -and on which the structure of Iranian-Islamic cities was based- its absence accelerates the deterioration process. Field observations in Qom, however, indicate a high level of diverse and continuous activities and resident presence in the historic and worn-out fabric adjacent to the shrine and within its sphere of influence, which is another factor contributing to the particularity of Qom's worn-out urban fabric.

• Security

The flow of social interactions and the capacity for presence, in addition to enabling social interactions, also generate security. This principle is directly related to the supervisability of urban spaces. Enhancing the security of worn-out urban fabrics through environmental design, formal and informal

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surveillance, and similar measures is considered one of the requirements of regeneration (Paknezhad, 2024). Diverse activities throughout different hours of the day and night within the fabric, along with the continuous presence of pilgrims alongside residents, increase the level of social surveillance and thereby strengthen the security of the fabric. In comparison with other similar fabrics that, due to depopulation, face high levels of social and cultural problems, this condition has been effective in reducing insecurity.

• Tourism Industry

The city of Qom, as the site of the second shrine of the Ahl al-Bayt, is considered one of the principal centers of religious tourism in the country. Centered on the Holy Shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma (PBUH), it accommodates diverse functions associated with religious tourism in its vicinity. Religious tourism, in addition to fostering economic prosperity, has ensured the flow and continuity of social life. Such activities, relying on existing parcels within the fabric and their inclusion in processes of revival and improvement, have also led to the enhancement of active collective spaces. More active collective spaces, particularly along communication corridors and thoroughfares, and their preservation in the direction of creating additional interactive nodes, constitute another relative advantage of Qom's worn-out urban fabric, the extension of which into the shrine's sphere of influence is also evident. The most important issue regarding the manner of intervention is the significance of the local community and attention to the prevailing lifestyle pattern within the fabric (Hajialiakbari, 2009), which represents the most ideal condition for stabilizing the resident community within its place of habitation. Considering all the aforementioned aspects, the historic and worn-out urban fabric of Qom possesses significant capacities for stabilizing its resident population. The preservation of the resident population and the prevention of the fabric's transformation into a migrant-receiving center constitute the primary reason for the particularity of Qom's central worn-out fabric, where traces of ongoing life are still observable (Fig. 3).

Discussion

The conducted investigations indicate that the approach adopted in the regeneration of the worn-out urban fabric is derived from a conservation-oriented perspective, in which, with an emphasis on preserving the physical fabric of the past, interventions have been limited to modifications in pavement treatments and façade improvement (Fig. 4). Although this emphasis on the physical dimension of the worn-out fabric contributes to enhancing its visual appearance, it does not substantially correspond with the nature of regeneration namely, alignment with the flow of urban life and contemporary habitation.

Whereas contemporary conservation approaches,

Fig. 3. Particularities of the worn-out urban fabric of Qom that have led to the preservation of the resident population. Source: Authors.

Fig. 4. The urban management approach in Qom's worn-out urban fabric has been limited to the physical regeneration of thoroughfares. Source: Authors, 2023.

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beyond physical dimensions, also address social, economic, and environmental sustainability, prioritizing community participation, economic empowerment, and the preservation of cultural identity alongside physical conservation (International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, 1964; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1972), over a purely physical conservation approach. Although, in the worn-out fabric, the provision of incentive packages and the facilitation of administrative procedures have delegated regeneration to the public, obstacles arising from upstream regulations constitute a serious barrier to the dynamism of regeneration.

On the other hand, the fine grain of plots and the impermeability of the existing passage network within the deteriorated fabric, in light of prevailing environmental conditions and the legal requirement to provide one parking space per residential unit under upstream regulations (Tehran Municipality, 2012) (Fig. 5), have, from the perspective of construction regulations, resulted in a situation whereby, in the event of redevelopment of existing plots, the limited dimensions of both plots and adjoining passages preclude the use of multi-level structural systems for tiered parking ramps. Consequently, adequate parking provision cannot be achieved; fewer residential units become attainable, leading to the erosion of the economic incentive for redevelopment due to reduced density and, ultimately, to a decline in the population-carrying capacity of the fabric (Mansouri, 2020) (Fig. 6).

Field observations further indicate that, despite its particularities, one of the principal challenges of the deteriorated fabric of Qom is the occupation of passages by vehicles. On the one hand, automobile circulation within narrow streets functionally transforms the vehicular segments of the fabric into traffic bottlenecks; on the other hand, vehicular movement in such passages effectively eliminates other functions of the "passage," including its social functions within the spatial organization of the city (Fig. 7).

Moreover, due to insufficient parking supply, the phenomenon of on-street parking along connecting passages, combined with the limited width of streets, has reduced the green landscape of alleyways to its minimal state. As previously elaborated in articulating the necessity of the issue, earthquakes and land subsidence constitute the most

Fig. 5. The regulatory attribution of deterioration to the urban fabric has reduced the regeneration process to the physical improvement of buildings. Source: Authors, 2023.

Fig. 6. The continuity of social and economic life within the deteriorated fabric of Qom. Source: Authors, 2023.

significant natural hazards in the city of Qom. Their intersection with the conditions of the deteriorated fabric necessitates urgent rescue-oriented interventions as an imperative-interventions that must not be confined solely to physical dimensions. On the other hand, the misalignment between the characteristics of the deteriorated fabric and the demands of contemporary life further intensifies the necessity of automobile management, despite the inevitability of its use. Such management can,

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in turn, provide a ground for the recovery of the meaningful and social -extra-physical- dimensions of the fabric. As the rate of car ownership among citizens has increased, and for many individuals' private vehicles have become a source of livelihood, the absence of adequate parking provision has, on the one hand, transformed existing passages into de facto parking areas and, on the other, overshadowed the social function of the passage (Hajialiakbari, 2017). Meanwhile, the issuance of building permits without parking provision is virtually impossible. Within this process, plots are continually reduced to ever smaller units, and the interplay between local conditions and regulatory frameworks, in the form of a vicious cycle, has culminated in the stagnation of redevelopment within the deteriorated fabric (Mansouri, 2020) (Fig. 8).

Unfortunately, at present, the regeneration of urban life has been reduced to the physical and body renewal of the city, resulting in deficiencies in achieving a balanced regeneration process and the contemporary revitalization of deteriorated urban areas (Paknezhad, 2024). The particularities of Qom in its historic and worn-out fabric have created significant capacities within the process of regenerating the deteriorated urban fabric; these capacities can be leveraged to accelerate the regeneration process (Table 1). Preliminary analysis of the findings indicates that regeneration in Qom's worn-out fabric, rather than focusing on the conservation of buildings, should center on the preservation of life (revival) within the fabric, considering all its dimensions. The phenomenon of deterioration and the regeneration program

Fig. 8. In the inevitable transformation of the living conditions, demolished plots are converted into parking spaces, illustrating the high demand for parking provision within the deteriorated fabric. Source: Authors, 2023.

require a shift in perspective from a fragmented approach to a holistic one, in order to achieve an accurate understanding of the regeneration process and the phenomenon of deterioration, and to ensure that implemented measures yield the desired outcomes. Therefore, in addition to physical phenomena, the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects that influence the formation of deterioration -and interact systematically- must be studied concurrently (Motavvaf, 2014). A systemic approach to the deteriorated fabric creates a holistic structure encompassing both material and meaningful dimensions.

The realization of such an approach, based on a systemic perspective, requires a strategic, holistic, and cross-sectoral program that enables the revival of life in the historic fabric from both physical and extra-physical perspectives alongside contemporary habitation.

This strategy relies on regeneration and is based on the empowerment of residents, addressing issues through the existing capacities of the city without dependence on government investment or intervention. The role of the state in this approach is to adopt a systemic view of the issue and to remove legal and operational obstacles to establishing a citywide regeneration flow, aiming for more efficient utilization of resources and infrastructure (Mansouri, 2024).

Achieving regeneration requires a set of social, economic, technical, legal, and other measures, and the only way to realize this is through the participation of the residents of the fabric, entrusting regeneration to their hands. The responsibility and role of governance in this context is to support regeneration by designing appropriate tools and mechanisms (Hajialiakbari, 2009).

This can be realized through government facilitation (exemption from financial obligations), the provision of incentive packages whose profitability benefits the government, investors, and residents, and, importantly, through participatory regeneration (with active resident involvement and delegation of the regeneration process from decision-making to implementation). Socially, this approach can revive the neighborhood center, restore the role of alleys as hubs of social activity, and reinvigorate collective spaces at the neighborhood scale, thereby reproducing neighborhood value and enhancing quality of life. Strengthening neighborhood infrastructure through the recovery

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Table 1. Regeneration capacities of the urban fabric based on the particularities of Qom's worn-out fabric. Source: Authors.

Distinctive Characteristics of Qom	Existing Capacities	Capacities Applicable to Urban Fabric Renewal
The Shrine as the core of urban life	Flow of urban life	• Utilizing the participatory capacity of the original residents of the neighborhood fabric • Public willingness among residents to participate in renewal if empowerment measures are provided • Tendency toward permanence and acceleration of the renewal process • Possibility of reverse migration due to the value of the urban fabric and investment opportunities
Value and dignity of place	Permanence of residents and lack of migration to new urban areas	
Security	The neighborhood as a center of social interactions and presence	
Religious tourism	Homogeneity of social and economic activities	
Active collective spaces	Social vitality and preservation of the local structure	

of a "participatory" and "neighborhood-centered" approach constitutes another outcome of such a holistic program.

The expansion of foundational and superstructural services at the neighborhood scale, rather than supra-neighborhood interventions, within deteriorated urban fabrics particularly in critical areas such as provision of green and open spaces and neighborhood parking, which are among the most significant deficiencies of worn-out fabrics and are less feasible for private-sector intervention (Paknezhad, 2024) has been proposed as a solution to overcome prevailing conditions. In terms of adaptation to contemporary habitation, incremental and localized measures can gradually reduce the dominance of automobiles, prioritize pedestrian-oriented design, and improve the "environmental" conditions of such dense urban fabrics.

The way in which "deteriorated urban fabric" is defined based on uniform criteria derived from the guidelines of the Supreme Council of Architecture and Urban Planning, its renewal is likewise carried out within a relatively uniform regulatory framework across all areas where the aforementioned conditions are verified. Therefore, many of the regulations governing renewal whether as limiting factors or as opportunities for redevelopment are similar in most cities across the country.

Although the responsible authorities in the city of Qom have attempted to improve the conditions for the renewal of deteriorated urban fabric and have proposed measures such as the use of legal incentives including unit-for-unit exchange with up to a 40 percent discount, expedited issuance of renovation permits within three months, and investment exemptions in target neighborhoods (General Department of Roads and Urban Development of Qom Province, 2025) as well as the possibility of obtaining two additional incentive floors, allocating up to 20 percent of uncovered open space for parking provision, excluding balconies and terraces from the calculation of building density, permitting one additional parking entrance, and providing three parking spaces for four residential units (Qom Municipality, 2023). These measures appear valuable; however, due to a one-dimensional perspective, the aforementioned solutions have not been sufficient to address the issue adequately.

Therefore, considering the specific conditions of the city of Qom and the numerous comparative advantages of its deteriorated urban fabric, revitalizing renewal efforts can initially be achieved through a comprehensive strategic program that includes cross-sectoral strategies and an integrated action plan.

Such a program will undoubtedly rely on two main pillars: participatory renewal and a neighborhood-scale approach. The "Neighborhood Safe Core," due to its multiple capacities and its ability to encompass both dimensions, has the potential to mobilize the renewal cycle.

Neighborhood Safe Core

• Theory of the Neighborhood Safe Core

The "Neighborhood Safe Core" is a local service complex centered on a consolidated multi-story parking structure located at the center of a block or neighborhood, preferably adjacent to other local services such as a mosque and a park. Houses within its catchment area can provide their required parking within the Safe Core. In this approach, on-street parking is prohibited and the widening of alleys is avoided unless absolutely necessary. The streetscape of alleys is designed as a collective space and equipped with green landscaping. Vehicular access to homes is managed only for emergency services and for access to previously constructed parking facilities.

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The "Safe Core" functions as the hub of communal neighborhood activities, incorporating a local produce market and a multifunctional space for ceremonial and communal events alongside the neighborhood mosque, thereby forming the center of the block or neighborhood. This complex becomes the focal point of the neighborhood and is designed with green architecture in the form of a hanging garden, considered part of the neighborhood's public realm, with the municipality responsible for maintaining its shared spaces (Mansouri, 2020).

According to urban management regulations and laws, providing parking for each residential unit is mandatory for the issuance of a building permit. Although recent renewal incentives have attempted to facilitate the provision of parking, such legal requirements still remain in force to varying degrees. Accordingly, revising urban planning and architectural regulations within deteriorated fabrics including regulations on minimum plot subdivision, building coverage, density, and parking provision (with attention to neighborhood-level parking supply) in accordance with the needs of resident households remains a fundamental requirement (Paknezhad, 2024).

One approach to easing these constraints is obtaining a building permit exemption from the requirement of on-site parking provision through the construction of a consolidated multi-story parking facility within the Neighborhood Safe Core. By providing the necessary number of parking spaces for renovated residential units at the local scale, within the neighborhood and close to residences, this measure can remove one of the key obstacles to renewal (Fig. 9).

In addition to making the renewal process more economically viable, this approach can accelerate and facilitate participatory renewal by residents themselves. Community-based regeneration is founded on the idea that the local community should play a central role in decision-making and in the implementation of regeneration projects, leading to solutions that are more sustainable and better aligned with the cultural context (Roberts & Sykes, 2008).

On the other hand, the creation of consolidated parking facilities, by organizing and reallocating on-street parking, will also result in freeing the streets from the presence of automobiles (Fig. 10). Consequently, the concept of the alley as a communal space which holds a significant position in Iranian–Islamic urbanism will strengthen residents' sense of belonging to their place of living. In other words, at a higher-level objective, revitalizing alleys can serve as a means to preserve the Iranian–Islamic identity of the neighborhood.

It is also possible to identify the existing service needs and deficiencies, as well as the infrastructure required for living at the neighborhood scale, and provide them within the Neighborhood Safe Core. This objective can be achieved through the multifunctional capacity of the Safe Core. The outcome of such an approach, in addition to increasing the provision of necessary service facilities, is an improvement in the quality of life within the residential environment.

The Neighborhood Safe Core, as a focal point within the neighborhood, also has the capacity to provide services and play a role in the field of civil defense. In this regard:

- It can transform into a local crisis management center during emergencies and, considering its neighborhood scale and area of influence, assist residents in times of hazard.
- Owing to its specific structural system, it can function as a safe and stable center for temporary shelter during emergencies.
- In addition to serving as a crisis management center, it can also operate as a support and logistics base during incidents.
- Furthermore, by allocating storage spaces within the service areas of the Safe Core, food

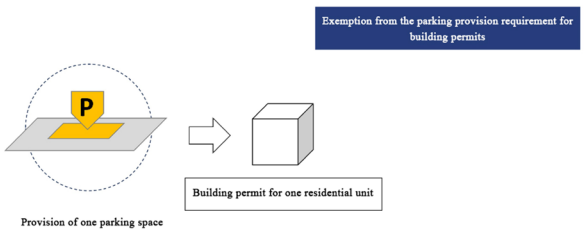

Fig. 9. Providing the required parking space for each residential unit can enable the release of building permits from the on-site parking provision requirement. Source: Authors.

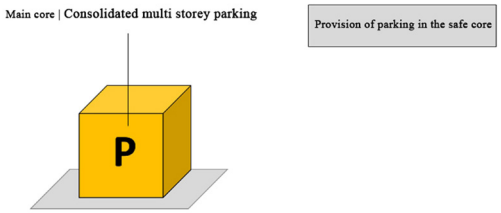

Fig. 10. The Neighborhood Safe Core, by enabling the development of consolidated multi story parking, will free neighborhood streets from the presence of automobiles. Source: Authors.

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supplies and safe drinking water can be stored and distributed to neighborhood residents for a certain period until the hazard is resolved (Fig. 11).

• Reviving the Neighborhood Through Reviving Its Center

Understanding the unique and unified concept of a neighborhood as an integrated whole depends on certain characteristics, the most important of which is the neighborhood center. The physical aspect of the neighborhood is diverse and lacks inherent unity: houses, pathways, and scattered services. The sense of cohesion and unity that emerges from this multiplicity is the result of how observers perceive and interpret the space.

The neighborhood center is the shared and interactive space for its residents an element that is common in their perception of what the neighborhood represents. The convergence of residents' understanding of their environment, which occurs through the presence of this center, leads to the formation of the unified concept of the neighborhood. Therefore, the role of the neighborhood center should be regarded as more than just a service hub or a point of access distribution; it must be considered as the very generator of the neighborhood's identity and essence (Mansouri, 2022).

• Operational Strategy for the Neighborhood Safe Core

Given that, according to the resolutions of the Supreme Council of Architecture and Urban Planning, municipalities and renovation authorities are obligated to provide multi-story parking facilities in deteriorated urban neighborhoods, the first step toward realizing the Neighborhood Safe Core is the allocation of land parcels within various deteriorated districts to initiate its operational development. In this regard, dedicating a significant portion of the basement levels of public-service buildings and state-owned lands to the Safe Core can not only supply the required space for its construction but also lead to the creation of additional usable land.

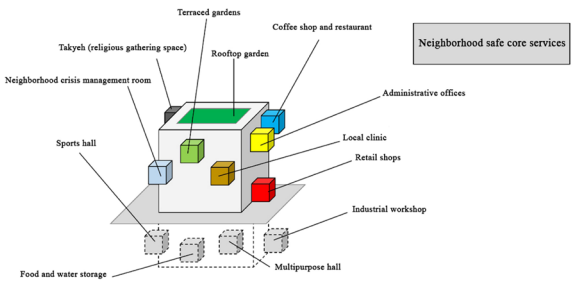

Fig. 11. Services that can be provided within the Neighborhood Safe Core. Source: Authors.

Furthermore, in plots with considerable depth, the sectional profile of the Safe Core can be terraced so that, while preserving the alley's visual profile for residents and maintaining the continuity of the observer's visual movement, the Iranian–Islamic identity and residents' perception of their neighborhood remains intact and uninterrupted.

Considering the specific conditions of historical urban fabric and its heritage-related regulations, the proposed strategy for implementing the Safe Core within historical areas does not differ fundamentally in structure or overall concept from its application in other types of urban fabrics (based on common urban typologies). However, attention to the following points is recommended:

- Reducing building height to avoid disrupting the skyline of heritage buildings.
- Emphasizing underground development while adhering to special structural principles that prevent damage to historical buildings and foundations.
- Providing above-ground services and infrastructure for the historical neighborhood based on tailored needs assessments specific to heritage areas.

• Operational Guidelines for the Neighborhood Safe Core

As an implementation guideline, the stages for developing the Neighborhood Safe Core in a pilot neighborhood in the city of Qom are as follows:

1.Neighborhood Study:

Conduct feasibility studies considering the conditions of the urban fabric, with attention to physical, social, economic, and cultural dimensions in an integrated and non sectoral approach.

2.Identifying Neighborhood Potentials and Deficiencies:

Determine the essential needs of residents while taking into account the neighborhood's inherent capacities.

3.Strengthening Assets and Addressing Deficiencies within the Safe Core:

Perform needs assessment and goal setting to establish a framework for identifying strengths and weaknesses.

4.Locating the Safe Core within the Neighborhood:

Subdivide the urban fabric into local zones and determine the appropriate location for the Safe

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Core based on its access radius and sphere of influence.

Summary

The process of renewing deteriorated urban fabrics through various regulations and guidelines without sufficient attention to the positive and negative environmental characteristics and the relative advantages of different contexts has been one of the factors that has created numerous obstacles to the renewal process. Since the majority of residents in such areas belong to lower-income groups, the lack of economic feasibility and the linkage of legal construction permits to the provision of parking have become major challenges. Given the social and economic conditions of residents, and considering the fine-grained parcel structure of these areas, this requirement has been one of the most significant factors slowing down the renewal process. Field studies indicate that life remains active in the deteriorated central fabric of Qom. Examination of the distinctive characteristics of Qom based on the authors' field observations and interviews conducted with urban managers of the city reveals the persistence of the original residents and the maintenance of a balanced relationship between local residents and migrants. Such a condition is rarely observed in other urban fabrics in Iran and represents a valuable capacity for formulating a renewal program that draws upon community-based potentials.

At the same time, there is always the risk that the urgency of accelerating physical renewal may lead to the dominance of a purely conservation-oriented perspective without adequate consideration of the social mechanisms of renewal. Therefore, the need for adopting a comprehensive and strategic program comprising several coherent action plans that together provide an appropriate response to the issue of renewal becomes increasingly evident. Such a program should aim to revitalize the historical fabric in both its physical and intangible dimensions while accommodating contemporary living. Moreover, by acknowledging both the material and immaterial pillars of the city, it should contribute to the regeneration of neighborhood value and the improvement of living quality, strengthen neighborhood infrastructure, and play a role in the domain of civil defense, which is among the essential needs of today's cities. Participatory renewal, grounded in the theory of the Neighborhood Safe Core and its multifunctional capacities, can make the realization of these objectives possible.

Conclusion

The conducted studies indicate that the central deteriorated fabric of Qom has maintained a high capacity to retain its population, largely due to the existence and preservation of its neighborhood-based structures. This phenomenon, within the inevitable process of urban deterioration, represents a major advantage compared with many other cities in Iran and should therefore be considered a key pillar in formulating the renewal program for Qom.

By establishing a multifunctional complex at the neighborhood scale, the Neighborhood Safe Core not only frees streets from the dominance of automobiles and strengthens the flow of daily life, but also increases the potential for renewal and economic value creation through the provision of shared parking facilities. This process can activate the cycle of participatory renewal and make community-based regeneration achievable. At the same time, from the perspective of the urban system and spatial organization, the Neighborhood Safe Core contributes to reinforcing and safeguarding the traditional structure of neighborhoods.

Considering the necessity of preserving the distinctiveness and relative advantage of Qom namely its historical pattern of living appropriate spatial identification and placement of the Neighborhood Safe Core within neighborhood centers and local social hubs (neighborhood clusters) can significantly contribute to revitalizing the spatial organization. Through the revitalization and enhancement of the neighborhood's status, the social life of the urban fabric will be strengthened for long-term sustainability, and residents will find stronger and more meaningful reasons to continue residing in their neighborhoods.

Conflict of Interest

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

Endnotes

1.The CEO of the Iran Urban Regeneration Company stated that approximately 4,000 hectares of Qom's urban fabric including deteriorated areas, marginal settlements, and informal housing are in need of regeneration. This area accounts for more than 30 percent of the city's total urban boundary. (4,000 hectares…, 2025)

2.Sharaf al-makān bi-l-makīn

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This classical maxim means: "The honor of a place derives from the people who inhabit it."

3.The Director General of Urban Planning Regulations Supervision at Qom Municipality, regarding the implementation of incentive policies, stated that allowing 20 percent of open, uncovered space to be allocated for parking, excluding balconies and terraces from floor-area calculations, and permitting one additional entrance for parking are among the key features of this incentive package for Qom's deteriorated fabric (Qom Municipality, 2023).

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