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Original Research Article

The Multidimensional Center as a Factor of Urban Sustainability
"Evaluating the Transformations of Qom's Center in the Consolidation of Urban Identity and Function"*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the theory of spatial organization in the Iranian city, this study seeks to analyze the conceptual and functional transformations of the city center of Qom across history. The central research question focuses on evaluating and interpreting the systematic rupture in the spatial structure of this center a rupture that has transformed an organic and integrated order into a fragmented configuration in the contemporary period. Historically, the city center of Qom emerged from an internal and dynamic relationship between the sacred force of the Holy Shrine and the socio-economic system of the bazaar. This relationship generated a radial and multifunctional structure in which religious, commercial, and social uses were intertwined, thereby defining the city's spatial and semantic identity as an integrated whole. The findings of this research indicate that the continuity of this spatial organization was disrupted in two historical phases. The first phase occurred during the Pahlavi era through modernist interventions, when a new street network based on geometric logic was imposed upon the city's organic fabric, producing the first rupture in the continuity of the center. The second phase unfolded after the Islamic Revolution, within the framework of a pilgrim-oriented development discourse and its institutionalization within the structure of urban decision-making. By privileging the transnational and pilgrimage scale, this approach gradually detached the historical core from the everyday life of citizens and ultimately weakened the urban and local scale. The originality of this study lies in its systematic analysis of this process through the examination of documents, maps, and physical data across six historical periods an analysis that moves beyond the one-dimensional approaches of earlier studies. The findings demonstrate that development interventions have generated a "spatial–perceptual rupture," eroded urban identity, and produced a dual condition in the urban fabric of Qom: a city in which the center has declined into the experiential domain of the pilgrim, while the periphery has become the sphere of everyday life for the citizen. This article argues that the decline of Qom's center is not merely a physical transformation, but rather a manifestation of a crisis in the city's spatial organization and identity recognition. It therefore underscores the need to redefine the concept of the "center" as an interactive and shared space between pilgrim and citizen in order to recover urban perception, balance, and vitality in Qom.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

As one of the country's principal religious-political centers, the city of Qom holds a transnational position and enjoys international symbolic authority. In recent decades, however, the city has faced two fundamental and pervasive problems: on the one hand, the gradual rupture between the Holy Shrine and the urban structure; on the other, the declining livability of the city for its residents. The dominance of sectoral approaches and purely functional perspectives in planning and development processes has rendered Qom a passive ground for fragmentary interventions. The consequence has been the growth of the shrine at a scale beyond the city itself, while the city has, in turn, become distanced from its own sacred and identity-giving core. The outcome of these interventions has been the diminished legibility of the city and widespread dissatisfaction among citizens with the quality of their living environment an issue that has now become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary Qom and may be understood as a persistent condition. It appears that the common root of these two problems lies in the way decision-makers, across different periods, have perceived the city as a whole. Iranian cities in the Islamic period, characterized by contextual, historical, and environmental coherence, were formed on the basis of an integrated system and through dynamic interaction with their setting; yet in the course of governmental interventions, they have frequently been subjected to fragmented and layered conceptions.

Within such an approach, cities are treated as though they constitute a uniform problem with a single solution, whereas the true distinction among cities lies not in the "organization" that gives them form, but in the "diverse responses" each city has produced, in accordance with its own specific context, to a shared organizational system. Neglecting this system reduces the city to a set of disconnected fragments whose differences become visible only at the level of physical form. As a result, corrective tendencies are directed not toward reconstructing internal relations, but toward managing appearances and protecting isolated components. From a systemic perspective, however, what matters more than discrete elements is the network of relationships that, under a particular system, has generated the city's spatial organization.

Among the elements of this system, the city center occupies a foundational and decisive position. It not only organizes the city's overall spatial structure, but also constitutes a necessary condition for the legitimacy of its identity and serves as a guide for the process of urban development. The center is not merely a physical concept; rather, it signifies the essence and defining character of the city, embodied in geographical form. The emergence and continuity of the center result from the conjunction of its necessary and sufficient conditions: factors such as road intersections and functional diversity represent sufficient conditions, whereas social and ritual events constitute necessary conditions for the life of the center. Within this framework, the city center of Qom historically functioned as the beating heart and engine of urban development by bringing together key urban elements and essential functions most notably the shrine and the bazaar. On the one hand, by concentrating religious, economic, social, and political functions, and on the other, by occupying the core of the city's communication structure and maintaining a close relationship with the bazaar, this center consolidated the conceptual and physical unity of the city. The result was the formation of a ritualized, value-laden, and simultaneously strategic space for political, social, and religious action—a space that reflected the cultural expression of its users, a culture that derived meaning from the coexistence and shared presence of the pilgrim and the citizen.

Centered on the twin foundational elements of the shrine and the bazaar, the city center of Qom has been one of the principal markers of the city's spatial organization a structure that has enabled the meaning of Qom to extend across different scales and from the perspectives of different groups of users. Nevertheless, the fragmented and autonomous growth of the shrine, detached from the city's systematic process of development, has been one of the key factors behind the present problems of urban legibility and the decline of urban desirability in Qom.

Physical incoherence, disorder in spatial organization, and the lack of visual and structural cohesion in the contemporary urban landscape, on the one hand, and the existence of a clear and consolidated spatial structure in the past, on the other, constitute some of the most pressing challenges facing urban development in Qom. This contradiction between past and present has

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intensified the city's spatial duality and, alongside the physical and functional separation between shrine and city, has generated another fundamental question: through which center, and according to what narrative, can Qom be recognized and understood?

Throughout its history, the city center of Qom has been understood through the interaction of political, social, and functional events within a coherent whole. The presence of the shrine, the dynamic activities surrounding it, and successive urban policies have all played essential roles in shaping the city's spatial structure and identity. Yet the question remains: amid the proliferation of development plans and functional demands, what are the factors that have contributed to the city's growing unintelligibility and the weakening of its center?

Adopting a historical-analytical approach, this study examines the transformation of Qom's city center across six historical periods and, by identifying key elements such as governmental policies, the socio-functional system, and the role of pilgrimage, analyzes the characteristics of Qom's spatial organization. In contrast to earlier studies including Ja'fariyan's predominantly religious focus and Abrahamian's political reading the novelty of this research lies in its systemic interpretation of transformation and its concentration on spatial–perceptual ruptures, a concept that has received limited attention in the existing literature on Islamic cities. The objectives of this study are therefore to: analyze the historical trajectory of transformations in the city center of Qom; assess the factors affecting organizational and structural change in the center; and propose applicable approaches for preserving spatial continuity in contemporary urban planning. Ultimately, by integrating archival evidence with the theory of spatial organization in the Iranian city, this research offers a fresh understanding of the trajectory of modern development in Qom and opens the way for reconsidering the center as the axis of interaction among pilgrim, citizen, and urban structure.

Accordingly, the principal innovation of this study may be defined at three levels:

- **Conceptual:** the city center of Qom as a perceptual, rather than merely physical, problem;
- **Methodological:** a historical-interpretive reading of the transformation of the city center with a focus on rupture;
- **Applied:** providing a theoretical basis for redefining the values of the city center in urban policymaking and planning.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach and is grounded in a historical–interpretive analytical method in order to examine the transformation of Qom's city center from its earliest formation to the contemporary period. The data were collected from a combination of historical and research sources, including historical texts and travelogues, maps, scholarly reports, and urban managerial documents. The analysis was carried out using three principal techniques: qualitative content analysis, historical–comparative analysis, and context-sensitive interpretive analysis informed by the theoretical foundations of the spatial organization of the Iranian city.

The primary objective is to reconstruct a coherent narrative of the physical and organizational transformations of Qom's center over time, based on available and relevant sources. Despite limitations such as the scarcity of archival material and the descriptive character of some of the available data, the study seeks, through a systematic and interdisciplinary framework, to reveal the mechanisms of spatial and institutional transformation in Qom's center and to provide a theoretical basis for rethinking the relationship between the shrine, the city, and social life within its historical context.

Literature Review

In recent decades, urban studies of religious cities particularly in relation to processes of development and spatial transformation have become an important field of inquiry in urban studies and planning. Within this framework, urban development is understood not merely as a physical intervention, but as a multilayered process requiring simultaneous adaptation to the city's historical, cultural, and social contexts, while also responding to the modern demands of urban governance (Healey, 2010). This perspective acquires special significance in religious cities, because such cities possess cores charged with profound semantic, symbolic, and identity-related meanings; accordingly, any development intervention may alter their spatial–perceptual equilibrium.

In Iran, the spatial structure of religious cities such as Qom, Mashhad, and Shiraz has historically

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been shaped through an organic interrelationship between the shrine, the bazaar, and the surrounding circulation network. This pattern emerged gradually through the interaction of religious, economic, and social forces over time. In these cities, the city center has served not only as the focal point of economic and social activity, but also as the principal locus for the representation of urban identity. From the mid-twentieth century onward, however, higher-order planning documents and comprehensive and detailed plans, as formal instruments for directing urban development, have played a decisive role in redefining the spatial structure of Iranian cities (Madanipour, 2006; Madanipour, 2014). Although these documents were formulated with the stated aim of urban order and renewal, in many cases they have produced a rupture between the historical structure of the city and modern interventions.

With specific regard to Qom, classical historical studies including Tārīkh-e Qom by Hasan ibn Muhammad Qomi have consistently emphasized the pivotal role of the Shrine of Hazrat Fatima Masumeh in the formation and continuity of the city's spatial structure (Qomi, 2006). More recent studies have examined the tensions between preserving historical-religious heritage and the pressures of modernization and development, showing that the dominance of physical and project-driven approaches has weakened the spatial and semantic continuity of the city center.

At the global scale, studies of major pilgrimage cities such as Mecca, Medina, and Varanasi indicate that the management of their central cores requires an integrated approach capable of balancing the preservation of cultural-religious identity with the infrastructural and functional demands of the contemporary city (Singh, 2013; Salama, 2016). These studies stress that neglecting the perceptual and semantic dimensions of space even where physical indicators improve can undermine legibility and place attachment in pilgrimage city centers.

Despite the body of scholarship on Qom, there remains a clear lack of studies that analyze the spatial organization of the city center in an integrated way, focusing on the values and status of the city center in relation to higher-order planning documents and theoretical frameworks of urban development. Much of the existing literature has either examined Qom's transformations in a fragmented, period-based manner, or has focused primarily on economic, physical, or managerial dimensions (for example, (Floor, 2003), which deals mainly with the economic structures of the Qajar period). By contrast, the perceptual dimension and the role of the city center as the most important component of the city's spatial and mental identity have received far less attention. Likewise, the relationship between development policies, physical transformation, and perceptual ruptures in the city center has not yet been fully explored.

By adopting a historical–interpretive approach, this study examines, for the first time, the perceptual ruptures of Qom's city center throughout its historical transformation, from the early Islamic centuries to the contemporary period. The main focus of the study is the way sacred forces and modern mechanisms of urban development interact and shape the spatial identity of the center an issue that has usually remained implicit or only partially addressed in the existing literature. The ultimate aim is to identify the key factors shaping the transformation of the city center including state policies, managerial changes, and the city's pilgrimage function and to propose an analytical framework for redefining the values of Qom's center with an emphasis on preserving spatial–perceptual continuity in contemporary planning and urban intervention.

Theoretical Foundations

In urban design and urban studies literature, the city center is defined as a central and multilayered core that, beyond being a mere geographical location, plays a fundamental role in the spatial, functional, and identity-based organization of the city. Based on both classical and contemporary theoretical approaches, it may be understood as the point at which the structural elements of the city such as population density, infrastructure, and economic activity intersect with its semantic dimensions, including cultural identity and social perception. In theoretical discussions and in the review of urban planning documents, the concept of the center is interpreted through a conceptual and functional duality. In theoretical literature, the center is defined within a semantic system; in urban documents, however, it is often reduced to a functional space detached from the city's other activities.

Drawing on the theory of the spatial organization of the Iranian city, the general concept of the center and its treatment in theoretical literature are first

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examined. The discussion then turns to the city center in religious cities, with particular emphasis on Qom.

• Spatial Organization of the City

Cities, as appropriated portions of space, take shape under the influence of social and physical factors and the vital needs of human life. Their existence may therefore be understood as that of a complex system composed of multiple elements and diverse interactions (Mokhles, 2017). The concept of spatial organization emerges from viewing the city as an autonomous whole. It is an abstract concept, referring to the order among the different elements that together produce the city. Spatial organization is one of the principal markers distinguishing different civilizations from one another, and, under the influence of the mental frameworks of citizens across different cultures and historical periods, it has taken different forms (Mansouri, 2020, 49).

This concept is rooted in a systemic understanding of the city and its constituent elements. It assumes that the city carries a meaning greater than the sum of its physical parts, and that this meaning arises from the order, proportion, and relationships among these parts. Such an organization is itself the outcome of a collective agreement among inhabitants concerning the way the city should be formed. In each civilization, urban elements are arranged according to a distinctive order and organization derived from a shared cultural framework. Spatial organization may therefore be regarded as a cultural differentiator and an identity marker (Abarghouei-Fard and Mansouri, 2021). This system is made up of semi-independent elements, and the order that governs their interrelations is equivalent to the city's spatial organization (Mansouri, 2020). Accordingly, in order to interpret this order, it is necessary to identify certain elements as indicators of spatial organization and to examine the relations among them. Territory, center, structure, and smaller wholes are considered the key indicators of the spatial organization of the city (Mansouri, 2007).

• The Value of the Center in Spatial Organization

The center is the most important indicator of spatial organization and is fundamentally an abstract and mental construct (Mansouri, 2007), signifying the essence and defining character of the city in a geographically manifest form. The intersection of roads, the mosque, the bazaar, the square, the bathhouse, the cistern, and similar elements represent sufficient conditions for the formation and continuity of the center, while social and political events constitute its necessary conditions (Mansouri et al., 2020, 55). In the traditional Iranian city, semantic and functional events overlapped spontaneously in a single place, and the concept of centrality together with its location, which was not necessarily the geometric center of the city gave rise to urban centrality (ibid., 53).

The center is thus a concept with its own specific place and defining characteristics; it is equivalent to the city in condensed form, the very essence of urbanity, and the convergence of the city's events (Mansouri, 1386). The city center is a landscape: an objective–subjective construct embodied in physical, functional, and semantic layers derived from collective memory, sense of place, urban identity, and symbolic representation. The nature and identity of the city are manifested in the center, which is recognized by citizens as the city's principal marker (Mokhles, 2017, 16). The center is also a specific place in which different social groups coexist, and it thus represents a lived ensemble marked by identifiable political, social, and economic characteristics (Hiscock & Cohen, 2018, 181). Beyond its role as the cultural expression of a society, the center is also a socio-functional complex that accommodates various social, economic, and political activities and events. Its functional role is therefore visible not only in semantic dimensions—political, social, ideological, and symbolic centrality but also in its capacity to aggregate functions. In many cases, the center has been described as containing multiple public buildings organized around three principal public uses: mosque, square, and bazaar. These were, first, social in character and, second, operated in relation and continuity with one another (Abarghouei-Fard & Mansouri, 2021).

• Conceptual Dimensions of the City Center in Theoretical Literature

The city center may be defined from multiple perspectives: geographical, functional, cultural–social, and economic. From a geographical standpoint, the city center is the core that determines the city's spatial boundaries and serves as the reference point for the organization of urban elements. In The Image of the City (1960), Kevin Lynch identifies the city center as one of the five major elements of spatial perception paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks that enhance urban

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legibility. In this sense, the center is not merely a physical place, but a system through which citizens' perception of urban space is integrated and urban dispersion is controlled (Lynch, 1960). This view emphasizes the need for strong visual markers such as iconic buildings to reinforce spatial identity.

From a functional perspective, the city center acts as the engine of urban activity. Jane Jacobs, in The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961), characterizes the city center as the "beating heart" of the city, where the diversity of activities commerce, leisure, and social interaction ensures social continuity. Jacobs argues that successful urban centers are those that combine density and accessibility with mixed uses, thereby generating social and economic vitality (Jacobs, 1961). This understanding is compatible with urban economic models such as the core–periphery model, in which the city center is seen as the locus of concentrated capital and labor and the origin of economic flows toward the periphery (Krugman, 1991).

From a cultural–social perspective, the city center is a symbol of collective identity. In The City Shaped (1991), Spiro Kostof traces the historical roots of this concept to ancient cities such as Athens (with the Agora) and Rome (with the Forum), where the center was the site of civic, religious, and commercial life and preserved cultural continuity. Kostof argues that the city center, beyond its practical functions, is a public space in which collective memory and cultural interaction are formed (Kostof, 1991). In more recent literature, this understanding has expanded through postmodern approaches; for instance, David Harvey in The Condition of Postmodernity (1989) interprets the city center as a space in which the contradictions of capitalism such as globalization and localism become visible and through which urban identity is redefined (Harvey, 1989).

Economically, the city center often overlaps with the notion of the Central Business District (CBD), introduced in Burgess's concentric-zone model. In this model, the center is the zone with the highest density of commercial and administrative uses and thus the maximum land value (Burgess, 1925). In religious cities such as Mashhad, Qom, Mecca, or Najaf, however, the city center carries different semantic and functional priorities. In such contexts, the religious role of the center despite its rich symbolic and identity value at urban and supra-urban scales may itself become a source of semantic and identity fragmentation within the urban system.

• Defining the City Center in the Context of Religious Cities: The Case of Qom

In religious cities, the definition of the city center must be adapted to their cultural and historical conditions, in which the religious dimension often takes precedence over purely geographical or functional considerations. In this context, the city center is not only the focal point of activity and economy, but also the core of spiritual identity and social flows. In cities such as Mecca and Qom, the center performs a systemic role in integrating the movement of pilgrims, economic activities, and the preservation of the cultural identity of pilgrimage (Al-Hathloul, 2017). This definition is based on operational criteria such as the concentration of symbolic buildings, density of activities, and accessibility for a specific social group the pilgrim. According to the theoretical literature, the city center of Qom may be defined as a dynamic religious-cultural core encompassing the areas adjacent to the Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (s), the Jameh Mosque, the traditional bazaar, and historic streets such as Eram and Chaharmardan. This definition is based on three key criteria:

- Geographical criterion: the center of Qom is the focal point of population concentration and symbolic architecture, and it delineates the city's religious boundaries. According to Qom's comprehensive urban plan, this core covers approximately 200 hectares and has been identified as the main axis of urban development (Ministry of Roads and Urban Development of Iran, 2017).

- Functional criterion: the center is the point of convergence of religious activities (pilgrimage), economic activities (the traditional bazaar), and social activities (the congregation of pilgrims and visitors). Historical studies show that, from the Safavid period onward, Qom emerged as a spiritual core of Shi'ism and concentrated economic flows around the shrine (Savory, 1980).

- Cultural–identity criterion: the center of Qom symbolizes the Islamic city and enables an integrated perception of the religious activities occurring there, thereby ensuring the continuity of religious identity. Yet this raises a critical question: if the city's religious identity is defined through the location of its center, how is the broader identity of Qom understood within its semantic system?

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Where, within the city center, do the other semantic and social dimensions of Qom find their place?

Definitions provided in urban studies and higher-order planning documents typically offer operational and function-oriented interpretations of the shrine precinct. Historically and symbolically, however, this precinct is not only a religious landmark but also the city center itself. The city center is thus redefined as a "religious-functional core" that operates at a scale beyond the city, managed independently of the urban whole and assessed through a separate, supra-scalar identity. Policies and actions aimed at developing the city center around the shrine suggest that concentrating activities in this core facilitates the accommodation of large numbers of pilgrims and enhances economic sustainability (Nasr, 2011). Yet in this process, the citizenry, the historical and functional identities of the city, and its spatial organization have largely been neglected, and urban development has been reduced from a systemic process to a sectoral and function-driven one. The semantic and functional transformation of Qom's center can therefore be examined through the analysis of its spatial organization across different historical periods. Such an investigation provides a realistic and analytical account of the process of development and transformation and yields findings that may inform urban management, policymaking, and future research.

The Historical Transformation of Qom's Spatial Organization and City Center

• The Emergence of the Islamic City of Qom

The primary factor in the formation of the city of Qom was the presence of the Qomrud River. The river, known as Anār Bār or Qomrud, rises in the mountains of eastern Lorestan and, after passing through the regions of Golpayegan and Khansar, enters the territory of Qom (Sarlak, 2010, 16). Throughout history, the Qomrud functioned as the principal driver of both urban and rural settlement in the Qom plain. The presence of abundant mineral resources in the region especially copper, iron, and gypsum also constituted an important factor in the early formation of Qom, particularly during the Bronze and Iron Ages (Sa'idniya, 1986, 145).

Historical sources from the third and fourth centuries AH, which recount the pre-Islamic past, make frequent reference to Qom and Jamkaran. Archaeological investigations likewise indicate that the Qom region held political, commercial, and religious significance from the Median through the Sasanian periods, the principal reason being its location along major trade routes (Sarlak, 2010: 19). Some chroniclers trace the antiquity of Qom to the pre-Islamic era and to the reign of Tahmuras, the third king of the Pishdadian dynasty, describing it as part of the Bilād al-'Ajam (Mostowfi, 1913, 67). Mamjan and Komidan are identified as two constituent parts of this settlement. In earlier periods, these were among the most important villages of Qom and were inhabited by the "old Persians" (i.e., Zoroastrians). This suggests that Qom existed before Islam, although its expansion and consolidation took place after the Arab conquest. Qom, then referred to as Mamjan, is described as "an old fortress for the Persians, beside which there stands a town called Komidan, with a river flowing between the two" (Ya'qubi, 1347, 49). According to Baladhuri, A'tham Kufi, and the author of Tārīkh-e Qom, the city was conquered by Muslim forces in 23 AH under the command of Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (Kuchakzadeh, 2001, 21).

In the first century AH, concurrent with the arrival of the Ash'ari Arabs, the Qom region consisted of seven villages or fortified settlements Mamjan, Qazdan, Malun, Jamar, Sakan, Jolenbadan, and Komidan which were gradually expanded and unified under Ash'ari settlement, forming the basis of the city (Badashti, 2005, 9). It is also reported that Talha ibn al-Ahwas al-Ash'ari and a group of Ash'aris settled in this territory, which included seven recognized villages, of which Komidan was the most important (Kermani, 1975, 73). In 189 AH, upon the request of Hamza ibn al-Yasa' al-Ash'ari and by decree of Harun al-Rashid, Qom was administratively separated from Isfahan and recognized as an independent city (Arabzadeh, 2004, 125). It should also be noted that until the third century AH, Qom was located roughly two kilometers east of the present city. With the arrival of Hazrat Masoumeh (a) in 201 AH and her burial there, the city's significance increased dramatically; from the third century onward, Qom came to be counted among the flourishing and important cities, although it was later devastated during the Mongol invasions.

From this point onward, the Islamic city of Qom developed in accordance with the spatial organization characteristic of the Iranian city in the Islamic period and passed through different phases of growth.

The spatial organization of Qom and the position of its center are analyzed here across six historical

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periods, from the second–third centuries AH to the present. In each period, the principal factors shaping the interpretation of the center are identified. On the basis of these findings, the broader patterns of urban development in Qom are examined, and the causes underlying the conceptual and identity transformations of the city and its center are interpreted.

• Period One: From the Third Century AH to the Timurid Period (Ninth Century AH)

The Islamic city of Qom first emerged in the area now known as the Lab-e Chāl neighborhood, which in antiquity had been a Zoroastrian village or fortress known as Mamjan (also rendered as Minjan or Manjan), and over the course of centuries this area remained the city's principal core. The alleys and neighborhoods of the historic fabric all developed around this locality, and the main circulation network of the old city eventually converged on the streets of Lab-e Chāl and Meydan-e Kohneh (Parizadi et al., 2017). The core of the Islamic city of Qom thus overlapped with the Sasanian core in the Mamjan quarter. The city was conquered by Muslim forces in 23 AH (Sa'idniya, 1987, 148; Modarresi Tabataba'i, 1965, 69) and gradually expanded thereafter.

After settling in Mamjan, the Ash'ari Arabs enclosed it with fortifications and constructed numerous buildings, to the extent that the river ran along one side of the settlement and the city walls encompassed all of Mamjan and parts of the lands belonging to the neighboring villages of Jamar, Qazdan, Sakan, and Malun (Sa'idniya, 1987, 151).

Because of the presence of the shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh, Qom gradually evolved from a small town into a religious-commercial center between the third century AH and the Safavid period (tenth to twelfth centuries AH). This phase was marked by state policies involving public works and urban development (notably the support of the Abbasids and the Seljuks), religious orientations that recognized the shrine as an important pilgrimage nucleus, and broader urban transformations, including the expansion of roads and neighborhoods. Although the Mongol invasions of the seventh century AH caused severe devastation, reconstruction under the Ilkhanids and Timurids revived the city, which subsequently reached its peak under the Safavids (Savory, 1980).

From the third century onward, caravan routes such as the Qom–Ray and Qom–Kashan roads expanded and connected Qom to wider commercial networks (Ya'qubi, 1969, 50). By the fifth and sixth centuries AH (the Seljuk period), Qom had become a religious-economic station along the Baghdad–Mashhad route (Ibn Battuta, 1995, 280). During this period, the city included neighborhoods such as Malun, Bazaar-e Kohneh, Mamijan, Komidan, and Jolenbadan (Qomi, 2006), all of which developed around Meydan-e Kohneh and the axis of the old bazaar.

In this period, the city center was determined by the intersection of routes and was located at the site of the present-day Meydan-e Kohneh. From this square toward the river, the city bazaar took shape, while neighborhoods were organized around it. As the urban quarters expanded along the market axis, the Jameh Mosque was also established. At this time, the shrine was located in Bāgh-e Bābolān, outside the city's boundary. Even so, the shrine as the city's principal religious landmark, together with the Qomrud River, functioned throughout history as a guiding axis of urban development. Urban expansion followed a radial pattern centered on the city core.

Across the history of Qom from pre-Islamic times to the present the city has served as a site of pilgrimage and congregation. Social diversity and duality have therefore constituted enduring dimensions of Qom's historical identity. Accordingly, roads, social diversity and events, and the economic vitality of the bazaar must all be recognized as important markers of the city center within the spatial organization of this period (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Spatial organization of the city of Qom and its center in the early Islamic period. In this period, the center was located at the present site of Meydan-e Kohneh, and the city developed systemically according to a radial pattern. The shrine was located outside the city, but because of its spiritual significance it later functioned as a guiding axis of development. Source: Authors, 2025.

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• Period Two: Safavid Era (Tenth Century to Early Twelfth Century AH)

Qom gained considerable importance during the Safavid period, especially after the reign of Shah Tahmasp. The city's urban structure underwent significant transformation in religious, social, and economic terms. Many Safavid rulers traveled to and stayed in Qom. During this period, the city entered a phase of substantial prosperity, and its population increased accordingly (Faqihi, 1999, 174). The centralization of Shi'i religious authority led to the creation of religious spaces, including the expansion of the shrine complex and the construction of religious schools, thereby reinforcing the city's identity as a pilgrimage center (Modarresi Tabataba'i, 1971).

Given Qom's strategic location along important routes connecting Isfahan, Kashan, and Ray, the bazaar also expanded along these routes and toward the river. As the bazaar developed, the bounds of the center likewise widened, and according to the same radial pattern that characterized the previous period, new neighborhoods were added to the city. Until the late Safavid period, the shrine remained outside the urban territory; nevertheless, it acted as a focal point attracting development and determining the city's spatial orientation (Ja'fariyan, 2009, 210). In this period, Qom witnessed the extension of the bazaar axis toward the shrine and the river, the growth of seminaries, the construction of major mosques such as the Imam Mosque, and the development of caravanserais. The old bazaar of Qom developed in a linear and organic fashion toward both the river and the shrine, functioning as the city center and its principal economic artery, where trade in spices, textiles, and pilgrimage goods flourished. Residential neighborhoods developed around the bazaar and were connected to the center by major thoroughfares. The names of neighborhoods often derived from city gates or from the ethnic-social groups residing in them, such as Darvazeh Ray (leading to the Tehran route) or Arabestan (the quarter inhabited by migrant Shi'i Arabs) (Hekmat, 1971, 145). Such naming conventions, themselves shaped by the migration of pilgrims and scholars, confirm the city's enduring social duality citizen and pilgrim in this period.

With the development of neighborhoods and the extension of the city's limits, the shrine entered the internal urban territory by the late Safavid period. This significantly enhanced the city's importance and shaped the direction of its growth. The key development factors and central markers in this period were social diversity and events, the intersection and expansion of roads, and the bazaar. The development pattern remained radial and center-oriented, while the dominant urban policy may be described as the spatial stretching of the city toward the shrine. Urban growth in this period was therefore radial and integrated, and the spatial–perceptual continuity of the city was maintained at a high level. This organizational continuity was a crucial factor in the social and functional coherence of Qom (Fig. 2).

• Period Three: Qajar Era (Twelfth to Thirteenth Centuries AH)

Following Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar's transfer of the capital to Tehran in 1164 AH, Qom developed under the dual influence of its proximity to the new political capital and its status as an unofficial religious capital. Qajar rulers especially Fath-Ali Shah and Naser al-Din Shah followed the Safavid precedent in expanding and embellishing the shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh and its surrounding structures. These interventions functioned in the state's political narrative as symbols of the alliance between religion and power (Ja'fariyan, 2011, 345). One of the most significant physical interventions of this period was the construction of the Sahn-e No (New Courtyard, also known as the Atabaki Courtyard) during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah by Mirza Ali-Asghar Khan Atabak A'zam in the 1250s SH. This large new courtyard, with its extensive open space and tiled iwans, substantially increased

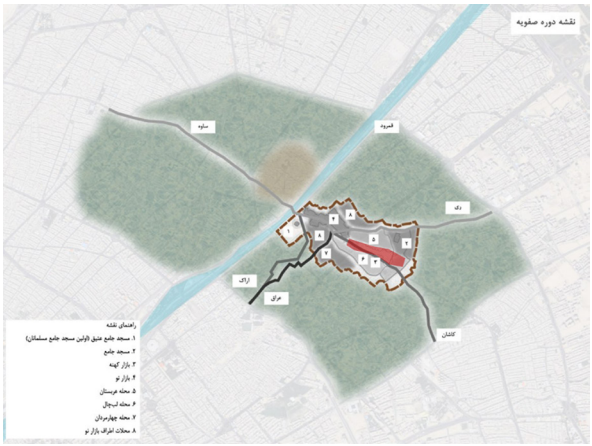

Fig. 2. Spatial organization of the city of Qom and the development of its center during the Safavid period. In this period, the city center corresponded to the bazaar axis. With the incorporation of the shrine into the internal urban territory, the expansion of the bazaar axis and the development of new neighborhoods toward the shrine accelerated. Source: Authors, 2025.

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the capacity of the shrine complex to accommodate pilgrims, corresponding to increased Shi‘i migration from Iraq and India (Bosworth, 1996, 312). The construction of public facilities such as timchehs (including the Grand Timcheh of Qom), cisterns, and bathhouses near the bazaar and the shrine added further functional density to the city center (Keddie, 1981, 45).

During this period, the increase in the population of pilgrim migrants led to the growth of neighborhoods and the expansion of the city's territorial limits. New districts such as Bagh-e Panbeh in the south of the city were often formed on the basis of the settlement of scholars and pilgrims (Hekmat, 1971, 168). As the city expanded, the bazaar extended toward the shrine and the river, and both the spatial and semantic boundaries of the center were enlarged. The city's primary structure remained based on the network of the bazaar and the connecting passages of the neighborhoods, while the hierarchy of access from narrow local alleys to main routes, bazaar rows, and the courtyards of the shrine was further developed. This pattern reflected the continuity of Islamic urban traditions in spatial organization, with special emphasis on access to the shrine as the city's sacred center (Amanat, 2017, 162).

The steady increase in pilgrim movement and the growing importance of the shrine also improved internal circulation networks and regional access routes. The city center and the role of the shrine were increasingly described in travelogues and documentary records. Madame Dieulafoy's account of the bazaar, streets, golden dome, and surrounding gardens highlights the religious-commercial synthesis of the city center (Qom in Travelogues, Qom Research Foundation, 2021). During the Qajar era, the dominant development policy was one of continuity and concentration: rather than creating wholly new structures, the government focused on strengthening and expanding the existing urban order a strategy consistent with the financial limitations of the Qajar state, itself constrained by wars and foreign influence (Ja‘fariyan, 2011, 350). According to Qajar administrative records, such policies included the granting of endowed lands to the shrine, thereby stabilizing the local economy on the basis of pilgrimage (Madelung, 1998, 280).

Development thus continued in a systemic manner and according to the radial pattern characteristic of previous periods. The shrine's sphere of activity expanded within the city and became one of the major identifying components of the center. The spatial and functional relation between shrine and bazaar tied everyday economic life to religious life. Despite the growth in the number of neighborhoods, the extension of the access network, and the expansion of the city's territory, Qom retained a high degree of spatial–perceptual continuity. The city remained an intelligible and coherent whole for its inhabitants, in which functional domains religious, economic, and residential were integrated in a unified pattern, reinforcing social cohesion (Fig. 3).

• Period Four: First Pahlavi Era (1307–1320 SH)

The First Pahlavi period marked the beginning of fundamental transformations in the physical structure of Iranian cities, including Qom. Reza Shah's policies of centralization and authoritarian modernization were fundamentally at odds with the organic and religion-centered structure of traditional cities. This orientation formed part of a broader modernization agenda inspired by European models, such as Atatürk's reforms in Turkey, through which the city was reimagined as a symbol of modernity (Zarrinkoub, 2006, 456).

The most significant intervention of this period was the construction of Hazrati Street, which cut through the city center and the historic fabric. This broad, straight street split the organic

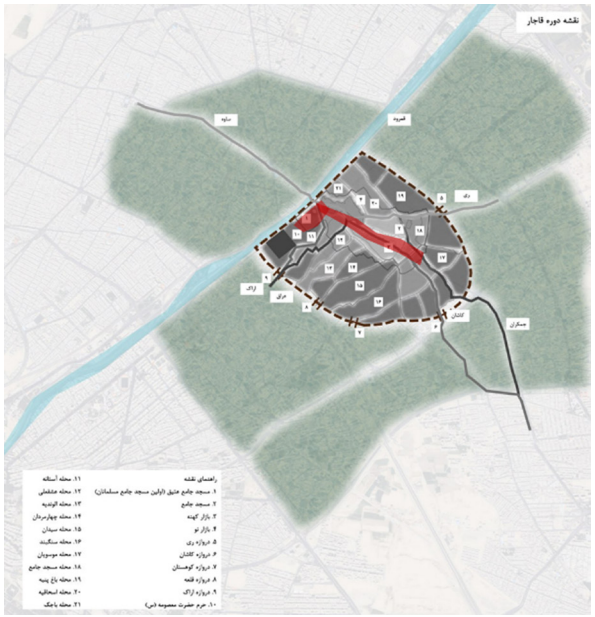

Fig. 3. Spatial organization of the city of Qom and the development of its center during the Qajar period. In this period, urban development remained systemic, and the shrine and bazaar constituted the most important physical-semantic elements of the center. Source: Authors, 2025.

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and continuous structure of the bazaar and the neighborhoods around the shrine. Its purpose was to facilitate vehicular access to the shrine and to create a modern ceremonial axis, in line with the spread of motorized mobility and imported automobiles (Banani, 1961, 85). Modern traffic circles and squares, such as Astaneh Square in front of the shrine's principal entrances, were laid out in a European manner in order to regulate circulation. Municipal archives indicate that the purpose of these street interventions was "the improvement of thoroughfares and facilitation of movement" as well as "the representation of the city's modern appearance" (National Archives of Iran, document no. 297/45, 1315 SH; Keddie, 1981, 102). These measures imposed a geometric street network upon the historic fabric and led to the destruction of parts of the traditional bazaar (Gaube, 1979, 85). The changes introduced in the bazaar, circulation network, and the shrine precinct had a direct and substantial impact on the nature and identity of the city center.

With this physical and semantic rupture, the development policy of Qom shifted from concentrated, radial growth to sectoral and function-oriented intervention. The dominant strategy became one of direct and structurally disruptive intervention. By demolishing parts of the historic fabric, the state superimposed a geometric order upon the city. According to documents from the Pahlavi Ministry of Interior, these measures formed part of an "urban renewal plan" that sought to redefine Qom as a city that was at once religious and modern (Floor, 2003, 82). This period may therefore be identified as the starting point of spatial and perceptual rupture in Qom. The new street severed the continuity of the bazaar and the surrounding neighborhoods, transforming the historic fabric into isolated islands; the human scale of traditional streets was replaced by the scale of the automobile (Gaube, 1979, 88). This imposed order conflicted with the spatial logic of the inhabitants, which had previously been based on pedestrian movement and the hierarchy of public, semi-public, and private space. A city that had once been experienced as an intelligible whole was transformed into a structurally dual condition traditional versus modern resulting in a reduction in social cohesion (Keddie, 1981, 105) (Fig. 4).

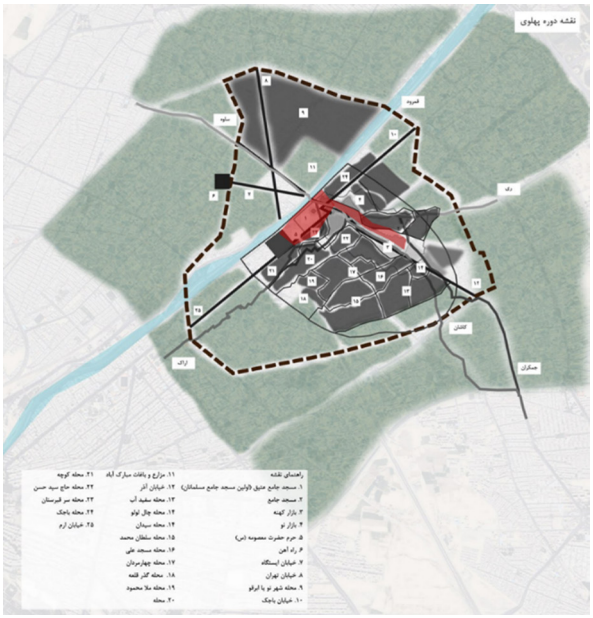

Fig. 4. Spatial organization of the city of Qom and the development of its center during the First Pahlavi period. This period marks the onset of directive development, the rupture of the city's spatial organization, and the emergence of a dual spatial structure. Source: Authors, 2025.

• Period Five: Second Pahlavi Era (1320–1357 SH)

During the Second Pahlavi period, increased oil revenues after the 1950s and the acceleration of mechanistic urban development intensified physical transformation in Qom. Migration to the city, population growth, changes in the physical-social structure of neighborhoods and of the city as a whole, and rapid peripheral expansion all characterized this period. The city's area expanded from roughly 10 square kilometers in 1319 SH to more than 50 square kilometers in 1357 SH. This expansion was accompanied by the construction of major roads such as the Qom–Tehran highway in the late 1330s and peripheral residential settlements (Hekmat, 1971, 210).

Such expansion, modeled on Western urban planning principles, marginalized the historic center and disrupted the systemic reading of the city's spatial organization (Hooglund, 1982, 112). Urban managerial energy was concentrated on the growth of new districts and suburban developments. Meanwhile, the city center, with religious structures such as the shrine and the Jameh Mosque, remained as an increasingly isolated core. Urban planning documents, including the comprehensive plan of Qom prepared in 1352 SH by foreign consultants, indicate that these plans, with their emphasis on

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horizontal expansion, weakened the continuity of urban identity and challenged the integrated perception of the city (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development of Iran, 1974).

Furthermore, the development of infrastructure such as water and electricity networks in peripheral areas drew economic activity away from the historic center and undermined the traditional bazaar. Socially, this period produced identity fragmentation and social division (Abrahamian, 1982, 435). As a result, the center lost its role as the city's guiding and meaning-generating core, while peripheral areas became sites of modern nuclei and new forms of social congregation. The city was thus clearly divided into two distinct parts: an aging and deteriorating historic center, and newly built peripheral districts. These differed sharply in physical terms (narrow alleys versus wide streets), social composition (traditional residents versus new migrants), and economic structure (Gaube, 1979, 95).

The Second Pahlavi period therefore deepened the spatial–perceptual rupture in the central fabric and, through widespread peripheral construction, moved Qom away from a traditional religious city and toward a modern metropolitan condition. Oil-based economic growth, function-oriented planning, and rapid demographic expansion were the key drivers of this transformation. The dominant development policy combined demolition and renewal in the center with extensive expansion in the periphery. Comprehensive urban plans, developed through top-down approaches, were unable to understand or manage the complexity of the new city's socio-spatial structure (Floor, 2003, 155; Zarrinkoub, 2006, 510). The outcome of these modern planning schemes was the intensification of urban rupture. The city center, with key elements such as the shrine which had once functioned as the productive and dynamic heart of the city gradually became encircled by wide streets, parking lots, and incongruous construction, thereby turning into a "historical-religious island" within a chaotic urban environment (Keddie, 1981, 185). Citizens' perception of their city became fragmented: the continuous and meaningful routes connecting neighborhoods to the shrine and bazaar were interrupted, movement became increasingly automobile-dependent, and the human scale of the city gave way to highway-scale infrastructure and anonymous building masses (Fig. 5).

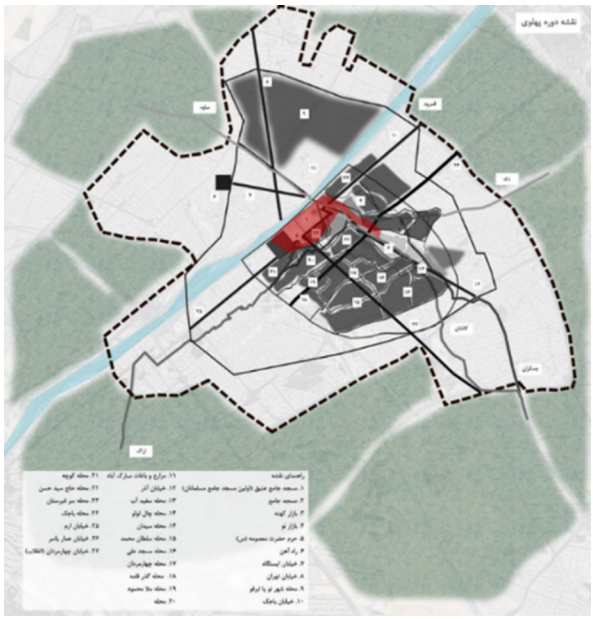

Fig. 5. Spatial organization of the city of Qom and the development of its center during the Second Pahlavi period. This period is characterized by sectoral development and the physical-semantic rupture of the city's organizational elements. Source: Authors, 2025.

• Period Six: Islamic Republic Period (1357 SH to the Present)

Since the Islamic Revolution, numerous development plans have been prepared and implemented for Qom. Under these plans, demolition and redevelopment around the shrine aimed at creating more open spaces and improving vehicular access have been pursued with even greater intensity. Additional parts of the historic fabric around the shrine, including segments of the bazaar and historic houses, were demolished in order to construct new streets and parking facilities. At the same time, new administrative and commercial functions were established along these roads and outside the historic core, further contributing to the weakening of the city center.

An examination of six major urban development plans between 1997 and 2021 demonstrates that development policy has been structured around three principal strategies: improving access routes leading to the shrine, increasing the city's capacity to accommodate pilgrims, and transforming the functional-activity system in favor of pilgrimage-oriented uses. Collectively, these policies have transformed Qom's spatial structure and pushed it in the direction of segregation (Fig. 6).

From an analytical standpoint, these transformations are part of a broader process of sectoral urban development in which the priorities of religious

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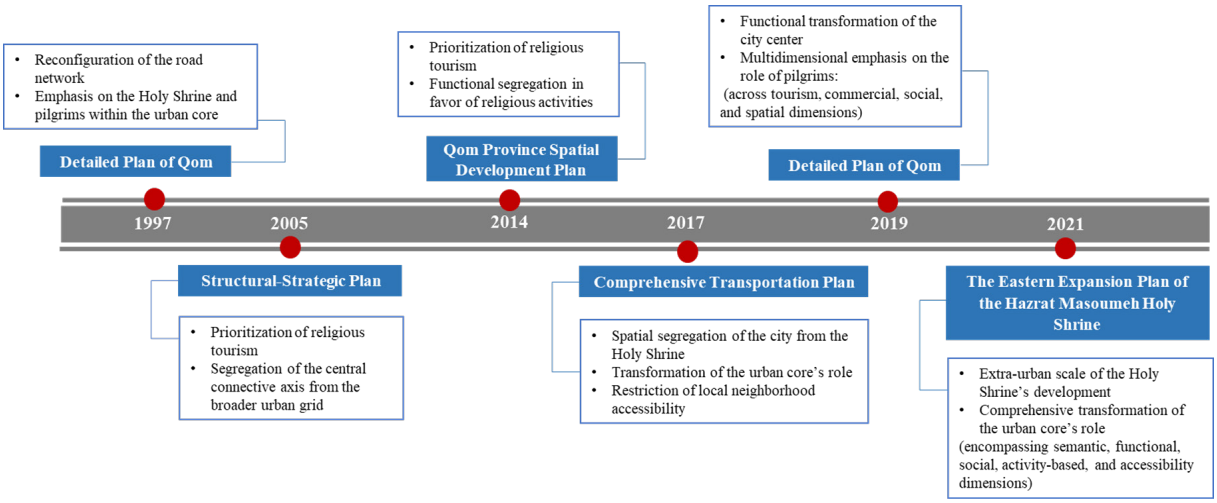

Fig. 6. Urban development plans of Qom from 1997 to 2021. A review of the strategies and interventions contained in these plans indicates that development was concentrated on three major policies: improving access routes to the shrine, increasing the city's capacity for accommodating pilgrims, and restructuring the activity–function system in favor of pilgrimage-based activities. Source: Authors, 2025.

tourism have been privileged over the everyday needs of citizens, thereby producing scalar conflict and contributing to the separation of the city from the shrine. For instance, the structural-strategic plan of 2005, with its emphasis on national and regional scales, placed the qualitative physical development of the city in the service of realizing Qom's position as a pilgrimage destination. The result was the isolation of neighborhoods into scattered historic islands around the shrine, while peripheral areas were assigned dense and congested uses. This approach based on the segregation of neighborhood streets and access routes from the shrine disrupted spatial continuity and diminished social vitality. Such segregation also violated spatial justice by separating neighborhoods from the main flow of urban activity (Fig. 7).

The detailed plan of Qom (2019) and the "Shrine-to-Shrine" development plan introduced a range of functional measures, including the acquisition of shops around the shrine, the restructuring of activities in favor of travel- and pilgrimage-related uses, the delineation of security zones for religious functions, and land clearance for parking. Such interventions, grounded in a one-dimensional, pilgrim-centered perspective, have resulted in the dispersion of urban activities to locations far removed from the center. They have reduced public space for residents, weakened social vitality, ignored the everyday needs of citizens, and diminished the attractiveness of the city center for local inhabitants. From a physical perspective, the historic fabric has been increasingly subordinated to religious uses, thereby upsetting the balance between the claims

Fig. 7. Functional and structural map of the city of Qom. This plan represents one of the managerial interventions that reinforced functional segregation, neighborhood dispersal, and the interruption of access systems in the city. Source: Structural-Strategic Plan of the City of Qom, 2005.

of citizenship and the imperatives of pilgrimage tourism.

The transportation master plan of 2017–2022, with its emphasis on restructuring access systems, facilitated pilgrims' movement toward the shrine but simultaneously disrupted the circulation system of central neighborhoods and separated urban functions from religious ones. Religious destinations became terminal points, and the city center lost its former role as a communicative hub within the urban system. In this sense, access infrastructure became an instrument of social separation and contributed to the weakening of urban cohesion (Fig. 8).

The eastern expansion plan of the shrine (2021) allocated a vast area to new shrine courtyards in order to facilitate pilgrim presence, but it also entailed widespread demolition of surrounding

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neighborhoods, imbalance in the distribution of services, and the conversion of public uses into commercial and accommodation functions. Vacant lands produced by demolition were transformed into parking areas and service spaces, resulting in a decline in social interaction. This plan intensified the spatial-functional gap and created a strong scalar contradiction with the adjacent neighborhoods, further deepening the separation between shrine and city (Fig. 9).

Taken together, the development plans examined here reveal that, despite their formal emphasis on the city center and the shrine precinct, the cumulative effect of interventions in social, access-related, and functional terms has been the erosion of the city's semantic continuity and the weakening of the center's identity position. A review of these plans suggests that a significant portion of development activity has directly undermined the city center and restricted citizens' use of urban routes and public spaces. Socially and functionally, these plans have intensified the segregation and identity-functional fragmentation of Qom's center. Key factors include the creation of regional-scale access routes for specific uses at the expense of the center's identity; the relocation of new uses outside the center; the prioritization of national and regional scales; the overemphasis on the city's religious dimension (the shrine and seminaries) to the neglect of other urban dimensions; the excessive concentration of services for pilgrims in the central core and the resulting decline of citizens' daily presence; the discontinuity of the circulation network; and the dead-ending of routes leading to the shrine.

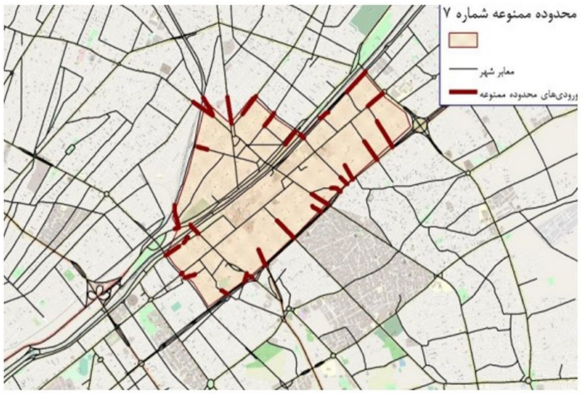

Fig. 8. Definition of access routes leading to the shrine in the proposed traffic-control zone. Source: Qom Transportation Master Plan, 2017–2022.

Fig. 9. The spatial and functional gap in the shrine precinct has been a key factor in separating the presence of pilgrims from that of citizens. Moreover, the expansion of this area operates at a scale fundamentally at odds with that of the adjacent neighborhoods, thereby reinforcing segregation between the shrine and the city. Source: Eastern Expansion Plan of the Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh (PBUH), 2021.

Analytically, these transformations may be interpreted through theories of the dual city, in which urban space is divided into one domain for tourists and pilgrims and another for local residents. While such a process may reinforce the religious economy, it also increases the risk of undermining social and cultural sustainability. In order to mitigate the future identity and spatial risks facing Qom, urban planning must adopt more integrated and interactive approaches capable of balancing local and national priorities.

Discussion

The city, as a dynamic and intelligent phenomenon, defines in the course of its transformation and development a layered system within a continuous semantic network. This implies that urban perception is formed in an integrated and holistic manner, while multiple layers of meaning are simultaneously embedded in different urban elements. These layers may be traced, assessed, and interpreted through the historical trajectory of urban transformation. Such an approach not only enables a deeper understanding of urban structure, but also allows for the analysis of the reciprocal effects of social, functional, and perceptual layers. Within this framework, the analysis of Qom's spatial organization particularly through the identification and transformation of the conceptual and functional dimensions of its center from the early Islamic period to the present clarifies the layers of development and the key markers of centrality in each period. It demonstrates that the semantic value of the city center has undergone

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fundamental change over time under the influence of historical, religious, and modernizing forces, and that this value can serve as a basis for assessing urban sustainability and social cohesion.

In the first three historical periods from early Islam to the Qajar era urban development in Qom followed a systemic process governed by a radial pattern that organized the elements of spatial structure around the center. The principal markers of the center during these periods were social diversity and related events, the bazaar and the functional-economic system, and networks of access and circulation. In the Safavid era, for example, the shrine emerged as a major religious landmark and determined the direction of urban development, playing a decisive role in the formation of urban identity. In the Qajar period, this role was further reinforced, extending the city center beyond the bazaar, with its economic and social indicators, toward the shrine. In this way, religious-political indicators were added to the center's value system, producing a deep interweaving of the city's spiritual and practical dimensions. What is particularly significant about these three periods is the existence of spatial–perceptual continuity and social-functional coherence, which make it possible to interpret urban development through three overarching systems: the social system, the functional-activity system, and the access system. This coherence not only secured urban stability but also offers a historical model from which contemporary urban management may draw lessons, especially in contexts where rupture can lead to crises of identity.

With the advent of the Pahlavi era, the onset of modern urbanism and the insertion of cutting streets introduced profound physical changes that, in turn, gave rise to perceptual transformations in urban space. Urban development in this period, marked by spatial separation and mechanistic expansion, generated significant shifts in the city's semantic-spatial systems, particularly in the center. During the First Pahlavi period, development followed a radial-axial pattern, and its principal focus was the transformation of the access system. The newly introduced streets defined a novel urban structure that privileged the automobile and subordinated the citizen to a mechanical urban order. These streets cut through earlier systemic configurations, disrupted the neighborhood system around the center, and destroyed parts of the central axis thereby laying the groundwork for the production of deteriorated urban fabric in later periods.

At the same time, however, although development became partially sectoral in its emphasis on access, other organizational elements such as the center and the neighborhoods still remained embedded within a broader systemic order. This duality in development marked the beginning of urban segregation and bipolarization in the interpretation of functional and semantic components. In effect, during the First Pahlavi era, development continued to operate through the same three core systems: while the social and functional-activity systems still followed a systemic logic, the access system increasingly moved toward directive and sectoral intervention. Despite the onset of spatial rupture, the city center did not yet experience an identity crisis or full social disintegration, because urban concentration remained intact and the center still functioned as part of a unified urban system. This period should therefore be understood as a transitional stage in which early modernization did not completely destroy traditional coherence but did prepare the ground for later segregation and semantic rupture.

During the Second Pahlavi period, this systematic rupture reached its peak, and development proceeded in a planned but sectoral manner. The city's three semantic systems social, functional-activity, and access were now developed in increasingly separate and autonomous domains, each governed by engineered urbanistic models. To facilitate this process, new urban fabrics were added across the city's expanding geography, and access was reduced from a meaningful and functional urban relation to a merely instrumental one. The spatial transformations resulting from this approach fractured the center and reduced its totality to smaller, isolated, and measurable components. Each of these components became subject to specific thematic or local development schemes, producing in effect an uncontrolled and fragmented expansion of the shrine area within the city of Qom.

These developments generated both bipolar urbanization and scalar conflict. The shrine came to be planned at a supra-urban and international scale, and its development was directed toward a selected social body that of the pilgrim. Policies governing this zone focused primarily on the religious built environment, while all other activities and social

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groups present there were subordinated to a religiously defined logic of management. Access systems were likewise transformed from traditional hierarchies into modern arteries designed to accelerate movement toward the shrine. These interventions produced a deepening social duality and widened the gap between the presence of the pilgrim and that of the citizen. Among the most significant consequences of this process were: a deep spatial–perceptual rupture, functional isolation through the concentration of pilgrim-oriented activities, and, perhaps most importantly, the emergence of a polycentric urban condition. These changes not only diminished urban cohesion but also intensified social inequality and the erosion of local identity. This pattern illustrates with particular clarity how modernization and mechanistic approaches to development may affect religious cities, especially when global or translocal priorities come to outweigh local social needs (Fig. 10).

In the post-revolutionary period, development plans and programs were largely based on the patterns established earlier namely, asymmetrical spatial development and a polycentric urban structure and thus reinforced both semantic-perceptual rupture and sectoral intervention. The preparation of thematic and localized plans in accordance with higher-order planning documents encouraged point-based and single-function forms of development at supra-urban scales. Despite the implementation of large-scale urban projects, spatial fragmentation, the absence of social and perceptual continuity, and ruptures in citizens' cognitive understanding of the city have remained among the principal problems facing Qom. In this sense, the city's present challenges are not the result of underdevelopment, but rather the unintended consequences of development itself.

These consequences include the prioritization of pilgrims and the exclusion of citizens from the present-day center; the reduction of public space for local residents; the uneven distribution of urban infrastructure and its overconcentration around the shrine; social duality and tensions produced by the presence of pilgrims, including differences in lifestyle and social needs; functional isolation and the elimination of use diversity in the shrine area; spatial–perceptual rupture through the socio-physical destruction of neighborhood fabrics and their replacement with automobile-oriented uses such as parking; and the proliferation of empty, unsafe spaces together with the extension of urban decay in the historic area.

The center is, in essence, a composite of multiple perceptual layers operating at different levels. It derives meaning from the simultaneous interaction and synthesis of these layers; once separated, they lead to the perceptual disintegration of place. In the course of the two-scaled development of city and shrine, and through the detachment of the shrine from the city's organizational and semantic context, these conceptual layers have become separated and the perception of Qom has become fragmented across different scales. The contingent relationship between social events and pilgrim-oriented activities, together with the altered role of communication routes leading to the center,

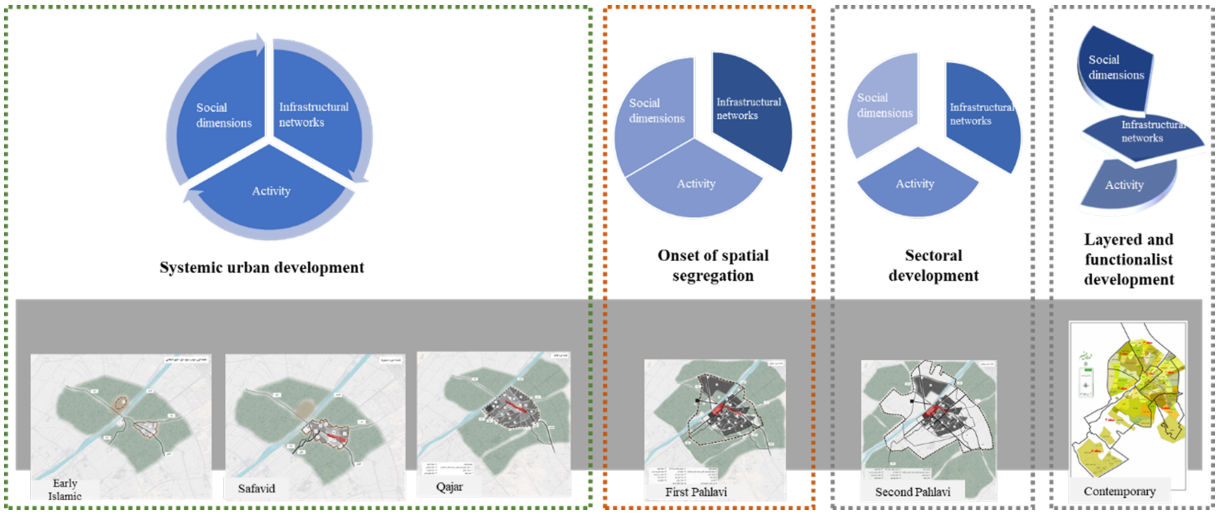

Fig. 10. Changes in Qom's development pattern from the early Islamic period to the Second Pahlavi era. Source: Authors, 2025.

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has been a major factor in the decline of the city center and in the reduction of the significance of the city's other organizational elements. A precise understanding of these processes—through the analytical study of spatial organization provides a basis for evaluating the center within the development process and for formulating guidelines for the conceptualization of the city as a whole, its management and reorganization, and future forms of urban development (Table 1).

Conclusion

Drawing on a historical-analytical approach and a systemic theoretical framework, this study critically examined the transformation of the spatial organization of Qom's city center across six historical periods. The findings indicate that Qom's center cannot be understood merely as a geographically bounded area; rather, throughout history it has functioned as a complex, dynamic, and multilayered system in which physical structure, activity patterns, social relations, and perceptual layers have interacted continuously to shape the city's identity and legibility.

At the same time, the comparative analysis of historical periods demonstrates that this systemic continuity was disrupted in the course of contemporary urban development. The initial roots of this rupture can be traced to the modernist interventions of the Pahlavi era, which, by prioritizing vehicular arteries and the functional separation of space, weakened the organic order of the historic center. During the Islamic Republic period, this process was not reversed; rather, it was intensified by the dominance of sectoral, pilgrim-oriented, and project-based approaches, ultimately giving rise to the present condition of non-centrality or more precisely, to a heterogeneous and discontinuous form of polycentricity.

The central contribution of this article lies in the identification and formulation of three fundamental and persistent components in the spatial organization of Qom's city center. Despite political, social, and physical change, these

Table 1. Schematic representation of social rupture and spatial-semantic segregation between the shrine and the city in Qom. Source: Authors, 2025.

Consequences for the Identity Position of the Center	Development Process	Main Components of Urban Development in Relation to the City Center	Development Pattern	Markers of the City Center	Historical Period
Spatial-social continuity and cohesion; continuity of identity; scalar compatibility	Systemic development	Social system; functional-activity system; access system	Radial	Social diversity and events; bazaar; road intersections	Early Islam to the beginning of the Safavid period
Spatial-social continuity and cohesion; continuity of identity; scalar compatibility	Systemic development	Social system; functional-activity system; access system	Radial	Social diversity and events; bazaar; road intersections	Safavid
Spatial-social continuity and cohesion; continuity of identity; scalar compatibility	Systemic development	Social system; functional-activity system; religious system; access system	Radial	Social diversity and events; bazaar; shrine; road intersections and communication routes	Qajar
Beginning of segregation; relative spatial-social cohesion; continuity of identity; scalar compatibility	Axial development	Social system; functional-activity system; religious system; access system	Axial-radial	Social diversity and events; bazaar; shrine; access routes	First Pahlavi
Segregation; spatial-social rupture; functional fragmentation; transformation of access system; scalar conflict; polycentricity	Sectoral development	Social system; functional-activity system; religious system; access system	Functionalist	Social diversity and events; bazaar; shrine; access routes	Second Pahlavi
Segregation; spatial rupture; transformation of social system; functional fragmentation; transformation of access system; functionalist urban order; scalar conflict; polycentricity	Point-based development	Social system; functional-activity system; religious system; access system	Functionalist	Social diversity and events; functional concentration; shrine; access routes	Contemporary

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components are traceable across all historical periods and constitute the analytical foundation of the study:

1. The access system, encompassing communication networks, movement routes, and patterns linking the center to the larger urban body;
2. The social system, consisting of spaces of interaction, the everyday life of citizens, and the loci through which collective identity is formed;
3. The functional-activity system, comprising the arrangement of land uses and the economic, religious, and service activities that sustain the vitality of the center.

The significance of this triad lies not only in its historical persistence, but also in the manner in which the mutual relations among these systems have been regulated. The findings show that, prior to the Pahlavi era, these three systems operated as a unified semantic-spatial network, such that change in one system was gradually and organically accompanied by corresponding adjustment in the others. This systemic logic enabled co-scalar evolution, the alignment of physical form with everyday life, and the continuity of a legible and perceptible spatial identity.

By contrast, the contemporary period from the Second Pahlavi era to the present is characterized by the collapse of this integration and the establishment of a fragmented and incremental logic of development. Within this pattern, each of the three systems became a separate and autonomous field administered by multiple and at times conflicting institutions, including municipal authorities, shrine administrators, traffic agencies, and heritage organizations. This institutional-managerial rupture directly translated into a spatial–perceptual rupture in the city center and gave rise to three successive but heterogeneous patterns of development: first, the radial pattern rooted in the historical spatial organization of the city; second, a radial-axial pattern dependent on traffic corridors; and finally, a functionalist and zoned pattern that reduced the center to a set of layered and disconnected spaces.

The most significant consequence of this fragmented development process has been the structural separation of the shrine from everyday urban life and the marginalization of the civic and social elements that once generated the center. This condition is the simultaneous outcome of two large-scale yet contradictory policy orientations:

- a competitive policy at the national and transnational scale, aimed at elevating Qom's status as a global religious city by defining the development of the shrine and its surroundings as an autonomous international project, while relegating the needs of resident citizens to secondary importance;
- and dispersed policies at the urban scale, which, by focusing on traffic and functional problems, have weakened the organic relations of the center and intensified spatial dispersal.

The cumulative outcome of this duality has been the formation of a fragmented and bifurcated center: on the one hand, a sacred and globalized core that is increasingly detached from its social context; on the other, an urban fabric that has been emptied of meaning, vitality, and centrality.

The findings of this research provide both theoretical and empirical foundations for intervention strategies in the city center of Qom. Moving beyond the current condition of non-centrality requires a rethinking of urban governance and the replacement of sectoral development with an integrated and network-based approach. In this regard, the following strategies are proposed:

1. A strategic integration of shrine and city through the establishment of an integrated management structure for the city center with the participation of all stakeholders;
2. The restoration of spatial–perceptual continuity through renewed emphasis on historic pedestrian networks and cultural-social routes;
3. A rebalancing of pilgrim-oriented development and urban quality of life through the reinforcement of civic and residential land uses;
4. Active protection of historic heritage as both an identity-bearing and economic asset for sustainable development;
5. The establishment of a continuous monitoring and evaluation system based on spatial, social, and perceptual indicators.

Ultimately, the crisis of Qom's center should not be understood merely as a physical problem, but as the manifestation of a deeper challenge in systemic thinking and urban governance. Reconstructing the relationship between shrine, city, and citizen requires a paradigmatic shift toward integrated, participatory, and evidence-based planning an approach capable of redefining the historical continuity of the center in terms appropriate to contemporary conditions.

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Conflict of Interest

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

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