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Original Research Article

Place-Based Development in Vulnerable Urban Historic Fabrics

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ABSTRACT

Valuable urban historic fabrics, particularly deteriorated ones, have in recent decades been predominantly understood and managed within a quantitative and positivist framework. Such an approach, by reducing these areas to "problematic" or "diseased" zones and focusing solely on physical and density-based indicators, fails to capture their place-based nature and inherent potentials.

This paper, adopting a theoretical-analytical approach, revisits the concept of place-based development in relation to vulnerable urban fabrics. It argues that shifting the focus from perceiving these areas as "problem-laden" to recognizing them as "capacity-rich" can provide a foundation for sustainable regeneration and improved quality of life for residents.

Through a critical review of urban planning and regeneration literature, and an analysis of the distinctive characteristics of historic and deteriorated fabrics such as historical-spatial identity, strong social and neighborhood ties, prevalence of walkable lifestyles, and the potential for activating heritage-based tourism and local economies—the study contends that a place-based approach unfolds in two stages: first, rejecting positivist and purely quantitative, rapid-response interventions; and second, organizing development interventions based on spatial capacities as "value-added assets" that transform challenges into opportunities for growth.

The theoretical findings indicate that adopting a place-based approach leads not only to improvements in physical and functional indicators but also to strengthened social cohesion, enhanced safety, improved urban health, and increased spiritual and economic values of place. This approach can thus serve as a foundation for policymaking and planning in the regeneration of vulnerable urban fabrics.

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Introduction

• The obsolescence of perspectives on deteriorated urban fabrics

The growth and development of any entity presuppose an understanding of its nature, context, and latent capacities just as each child develops uniquely and requires specific nurturing conditions. Urban theorists have long described the city as a living organism. Extending this metaphor, one may also consider smaller urban components as living entities with distinct characteristics. From this perspective, when discussing the development and growth of urban fabrics, it becomes evident that the relationship established with each urban component as a subject of development must necessarily differ.

"Vulnerable" urban fabrics are no exception to this rule; rather, due to their multiple challenges, the importance of understanding them becomes even more critical. The development of a so-called "diseased" fabric first requires diagnosing the causes of its condition and then prescribing context-specific solutions. Such solutions must be grounded in the intrinsic capacities of that fabric to confront and overcome its challenges.

Many scholars argue that cities, like living organisms, inevitably age and deteriorate. While this view is valid, one of the key problematics of deteriorated urban fabrics representing vulnerable areas is that their decline is not merely the result of time but also of inaction and, more importantly, the obsolescence of prevailing perspectives among policymakers and academia.

A review of urban studies and dominant discourses reveals that deterioration is often interpreted narrowly as a decline in physical and functional qualities. This reductionist view leads to perceiving vulnerable fabrics as "expired" and "obstructive" elements within the city. However, such a perspective is itself outdated; even if it temporarily resolves certain inefficiencies, the underlying issues are likely to re-emerge.

In other words, although these areas naturally undergo aging similar to elderly individuals it should not be overlooked that they also possess deeper insights, experiences, and distinctive capacities compared to other urban areas. These qualities provide opportunities to address challenges and enable development to continue in a more meaningful and enhanced manner.

The author argues that place-based development offers a viable response to the problems of vulnerable urban areas. This paper seeks to demonstrate that adopting a place-based approach is particularly significant in such contexts due to the high concentration and prominence of "place" characteristics. Within this framework, development is understood not merely as problem-solving, but as the strategic utilization of place-based qualities and opportunities to address challenges.

Research Questions

This study initially examines the distinguishing factors of development in vulnerable urban fabrics compared to other urban areas. The first research question is:

1. What factors differentiate development in vulnerable urban fabrics from other urban fabrics?

This question seeks to identify the specific characteristics and challenges of these areas including economic, social, cultural, and environmental issues that tend to be more pronounced in such contexts. It also aims to clarify why a specialized understanding of these areas is necessary.

The second question addresses the advantages of the place-based approach:

2. What advantages does the place-based approach offer in the development of vulnerable urban fabrics compared to other approaches?

This question focuses on analyzing the specific benefits of this approach in responding to the unique problems and needs of these areas.

Finally, the study explores the requirements for implementing place-based development:

3. What are the requirements of place-based development in vulnerable areas, and how can they be effectively incorporated into planning and implementation processes?

This question aims to identify the essential conditions for the successful application of this approach.

Theoretical Foundations

• Vulnerable urban fabrics

In urban studies discourse, vulnerable urban fabrics refer to areas of the city that are at risk of degradation, damage, or destruction due to physical, social, economic, environmental, safety, and security-related factors (Mohammadpour et al., 2016). Compared to other urban areas, these fabrics exhibit higher levels of inefficiency, which in turn leads to their disconnection from the broader urban system (Abbaszadegan et al., 2013).

There is a relative consensus in both Iranian and international urban studies regarding the terminology and categories of vulnerable urban fabrics. These typically include:

1. Historic fabrics
2. Old fabrics
3. Deteriorated (blighted) fabrics

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4. Informal settlements (Sediqi Erfaei & Cheshmbarahi, 2015)

Although some scholars do not distinguish significantly between "old" and "historic" fabrics in terms of vulnerability, both generally refer to areas developed before 1921 (1300 SH). The key difference is that historic fabrics are officially registered as national heritage and are subject to preservation regulations (Table 1).

For the purposes of this study, these two categories are considered together under the broader category of historic fabrics, as historic and deteriorated fabrics share many similarities in terms of vulnerability indicators. Therefore, the focus of this paper is primarily on these two types.

Despite relative agreement on categorization, there is no precise boundary for identifying vulnerability. According to a resolution by the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran, deteriorated urban fabrics are identified based on urban blocks in which more than 50% of parcels meet the following three criteria:

Instability: Lack of proper structural systems and resistance, especially in earthquakes, often due to non-compliance with building standards.

Inaccessibility: Insufficient access and narrow streets, typically with widths less than 6 meters.

Fine grain (parcel fragmentation): High density of small plots, typically less than 200 square meters (Motevali Habibi & Barqchi, 2015).

This definition can be critically challenged on two major grounds:

First, it reduces vulnerability solely to physical aspects, neglecting environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions that must be considered simultaneously (Nasr, 2017).

Second, it relies excessively on quantitative thresholds. For instance, an urban block with 49% of parcels meeting these criteria would not be classified as deteriorated, despite potentially suffering from similar deficiencies.

Thus, this definition suffers from two key shortcomings:

• Physical reductionism

• Quantitative reductionism

• Quantitative and qualitative indicators of vulnerability

Urban scholars have proposed numerous indicators to assess vulnerability in historic and deteriorated fabrics. These indicators can generally be divided into two categories:

• Quantitative indicators

• Qualitative–interpretive indicators

From a qualitative perspective, some scholars argue that beyond numerical measures, deteriorated fabrics can be understood as areas where there is a mismatch between services provided and current needs (Sediqi Erfaei & Cheshmbarahi, 2015). This perspective is often framed within the concept of social justice. From a geographical standpoint, equitable spatial distribution of services and resources across urban areas and equal access for citizens is synonymous with social justice. Unequal distribution leads to physical and social crises and complex spatial problems, whereas equitable distribution reduces intra-urban travel and enables residents to meet their needs locally (Amjad & Soltani, 2019).

Such vulnerable areas often suffer from both extremes:

• insufficient service provision for self-sufficiency

• and physical disconnection from surrounding areas due to complex street networks

This physical isolation, as noted by Donald Appleyard, intensifies social isolation. According to him, physical disconnection reinforces the relationship between spatial and social fragmentation, leading to reduced social activity and increased urban problems.

Among the multiple challenges of deteriorated and historic urban fabrics, vulnerability to natural hazards particularly earthquakes is perhaps the primary concern for urban managers and academics. Numerous factors contributing to this vulnerability have been identified, although some remain open to critique.

Urban form and spatial structure such as the geometry of the urban fabric, availability of open spaces, street dimensions, and spatial organization play a significant role in how cities respond to crises (Moghadam, 2021). Studies indicate that more regular and coherent

Table 1. Conventional vs. place-based interpretations of the supreme council's criteria. Source: authors

Indicator (Supreme Council Criteria)	Conventional Reductionist View (Physical)	Place-Based Reinterpretation (Qualitative)
Instability	Merely the lack of structural and technical systems	Potential for resilience through social capital and neighborhood cohesion
Inaccessibility	Narrow streets limiting vehicular movement	Opportunity for walkability and enhanced social interaction
Fine-grained parcels (fragmentation)	High density and small plot sizes	High density of social relations and strong neighborhood structure

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urban fabrics tend to demonstrate higher levels of safety compared to irregular ones. Open spaces are particularly critical, as they can function as emergency evacuation areas, temporary shelters, and post-disaster gathering points. These spaces must be capable of accommodating the population of the affected area. Furthermore, spatial organization also matters: mono-centric cities often show less resilience compared to polycentric urban structures with hierarchical spatial divisions (neighborhood, district, region) (Amjad & Soltani, 2019).

In deteriorated urban fabrics, characteristics such as irregular and organic layouts, asymmetrical distributions of open and built spaces, winding street networks, and irregular parcel shapes significantly increase the destructive impacts of natural disasters (Bitarafan et al., 2020). Consequently, safety levels in these areas are considerably lower than in other parts of the city (Motevali Habibi & Barqchi, 2015).

Another major factor is structural instability of buildings. The prevalent use of traditional materials such as adobe, mud, and unreinforced brick, combined with weak structural systems, results in severe destruction and high casualties during earthquakes (Moghadam, 2021). Additionally, accessibility limitations exacerbate disaster impacts. Narrow streets hinder rescue and emergency operations, often increasing casualties compared to other urban areas (Amjad & Soltani, 2019).

However, vulnerability is not limited to structural issues. Land-use incompatibility is another critical factor. The presence of unauthorized industrial activities within residential areas, severe shortages of service spaces, poor land-use planning, and inappropriate adjacencies uch as proximity between schools, hospitals, fuel storage, and industrial facilities can lead to catastrophic consequences during crises, particularly due to traffic congestion and functional conflicts (Motevali Habibi & Barqchi, 2015; Moghadam, 2021).

Population density is another frequently cited factor. While higher density may complicate evacuation and emergency response, it does not directly increase the intensity of destruction. Rather, its significance becomes more pronounced in post-disaster conditions (Motevali Habibi & Barqchi, 2015). Therefore, density alone should not be equated with vulnerability. In addition to these factors, a range of social, economic, legal, and cultural issues contribute to vulnerability, including:

- addiction, crime, and social disorders
- insecurity for women and children
- low land and housing values (Moghadam, 2021)
- concentration of low-income populations
- lack of formal property documentation and unclear ownership boundaries
- inheritance fragmentation (Strategic Neighborhood Development Document, 2010)
- limited educational facilities relative to population density
- weak waste management infrastructure (Nasr, 2017)

• Development and place-based approach in vulnerable fabrics

When discussing deteriorated urban fabrics, a series of recurring concepts emerge, such as reconstruction, improvement, renovation, revival, rehabilitation, revitalization, and regeneration. The multiplicity of these terms reflects the diverse approaches scholars have taken toward addressing this issue. A closer examination of these concepts reveals that, at the level of problem identification, there is broad consensus. Most approaches recognize similar categories of challenges, including:

- economic issues (e.g., poverty, low property value)
- social issues (e.g., high crime rates, social fragmentation)
- physical issues (e.g., poor street networks, building quality)
- cultural issues (e.g., lack of educational infrastructure)

However, the divergence lies in the approach to development. As previously discussed, the dominant discourse in urban planning and management tends to view historic and especially deteriorated fabrics as "problematic" or "diseased" areas that hinder urban development. The major shortcoming of these approaches is that development is reduced to positivist problem-solving, focusing exclusively on eliminating deficiencies while ignoring the unique potentials embedded in these areas. In contrast, the place-based development approach introduces a fundamentally different perspective. It emphasizes the capacities and inherent potentials of these fabrics as the basis for their regeneration and growth. At the same time, it does not deny the necessity of quantitative interventions for mitigating risks and improving safety.

According to official statistics, more than 76,000 hectares of deteriorated urban fabric across 383 cities in Iran comprising approximately 13% of total urban areas have been identified (Sediqi Erfaei & Cheshmbarahi, 2015). Over 11 million residents live in these areas and are exposed to various risks (Bitarafan et al., 2020). Despite policy

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frameworks such as the Fifth Development Plan (2013), which optimistically projected a 10-year timeframe for renewal and improvement, these objectives have not yet been achieved (Motevali Habibi & Barqchi, 2015). Meanwhile, with approximately 35% of the country's area located in high-risk seismic zones, the possibility of a major disaster remains ever-present (Doroudi & Moghadam, 2018).

These conditions underscore the urgency of addressing vulnerable urban fabrics. Clearly, eliminating these areas or displacing their populations is not a viable solution. Constraints such as limited land availability and the need to prevent urban sprawl further reinforce the importance of inner-city development strategies. Approaches such as infill development and endogenous development prioritize the regeneration of underutilized and deteriorated urban areas and advocate for the equitable redistribution of resources. These areas should therefore be considered primary targets for urban investment (Mirshafiei et al., 2021).

• Challenges in the terminology of development discourse

The suffix "-making" (e.g., improvement, renovation, reconstruction) in urban development terminology indicates that these approaches are mostly centered on building or physical intervention. This suggests that such terms do not operate at the same conceptual level as the place-based approach. Place-based development is a framework or paradigm, whereas these terms define specific operational outcomes. In other words, they represent a lower level of abstraction. Because the place-based approach avoids premature prescriptions, it does not necessarily assume that "construction" or "physical transformation" is the appropriate solution.

For instance, the conventional understanding of urban improvement (behsazi) focuses on modernizing urban space rather than reproducing past spatial forms. It emphasizes utilizing existing potentials while strengthening positive aspects and weakening negative ones (Nasr, 2017). However, its object of intervention is primarily buildings, not place.

Similarly:

• Reconstruction focuses on demolition and rebuilding (Nasr, 2017).

• Renovation typically addresses areas characterized by structural instability, small parcel sizes, and poor accessibility, often requiring municipal intervention (Moghadam, 2021).

The limitations of these reductionist approaches become evident when addressing complex urban challenges. For example, the standard response to narrow streets in deteriorated fabrics is street widening. However, the perceived "inaccessibility" of historic fabrics is not solely due to narrow streets. The assumption that streets narrower than 6 meters necessarily indicate dysfunction reflects a modernist logic similar to the belief that widening roads solves traffic congestion. Today, it is well established that increasing road capacity often induces more traffic rather than alleviating it.

Moreover, accessibility is not equivalent to mobility. A wide street may facilitate movement but lack accessibility or social engagement, whereas a narrow alley may be highly accessible and vibrant. Empirical studies show that the proportion of street area in deteriorated fabrics is often higher than the urban average (Abbaszadegan et al., 2013), challenging the assumption that limited street space is the primary issue. These observations reveal that, in the absence of a place-based perspective, urban strategies tend to reduce streets to mere traffic infrastructure, ignoring their social and spatial significance.

• "More place-like" than other urban areas

From a place-based perspective, many shortcomings of conventional approaches become evident. As a holistic and systems-oriented framework, place-based thinking recognizes that historic and deteriorated

Table 2. Challenges, opportunities, and place-based strategies in vulnerable urban fabrics. Source: authors.

Primary Challenge	Latent Opportunity	Place-Based Strategy
Narrow and complex street networks (inaccessibility)	Natural setting for walkability and social interaction	Strengthening pedestrian pathways, creating pause points, enhancing natural surveillance
High population density	Strong neighborhood networks and mutual support potential	Designing participatory public spaces, reinforcing social capital
Physical deterioration and structural instability	Opportunity for regeneration while preserving identity	Incremental upgrading using local materials and resident participation
Economic poverty and low land value	Potential for heritage-based local economy	Promoting small-scale tourism, local markets, and creative industries
Disconnection from surrounding urban fabric	Preservation of neighborhood identity and boundaries	Smart connectivity through pedestrian corridors and public transport integration
Insecurity and crime (due to weak surveillance)	Potential for natural surveillance through active street life	Smart lighting, activation of building frontages, mixed-use development

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fabrics despite their deficiencies possess unique qualities derived from their historical continuity.

Urban policymakers and scholars should not allow concern over deficiencies to obscure the latent potentials of these areas. From this perspective, historic and deteriorated fabrics can be characterized by the following key attributes:

- A stronger sense of place
- More robust social ties
- Distinct historical-spatial identity
- Strong neighborhood orientation
- A pronounced sense of belonging
- A dominant walkable lifestyle

These characteristics transform such fabrics into unique and valuable urban environments that can function as catalysts for development and transformation.

By adopting a place-based approach, these potentials can be leveraged to:

- improve residents' quality of life
- preserve and revitalize cultural and historical identity
- create new economic opportunities

Importantly, this approach positions residents as primary stakeholders in planning and decision-making processes, promoting their active participation in shaping more sustainable and meaningful places.

• Transforming challenges into opportunities through a place-based approach

From a place-based perspective, urban streets are no longer understood merely as circulation routes or traffic nodes. Despite their existing challenges whether in purely physical terms, such as their geometry and distinctive spatial sections, or in their objective–subjective dimensions they embody conditions that support pedestrian life and social interaction. Pathways in historic and deteriorated fabrics can be likened to traditional bazaar axes, which historically functioned as the main urban thoroughfares. These were not merely routes connecting two points, but spaces that facilitated interaction and a richer lived experience. Furthermore, given that a large proportion of residents in deteriorated fabrics belong to lower-income groups, it can be assumed that relatively few households rely on private vehicles for daily mobility; consequently,pedestrian life becomes more prominent in these environments (Abbaszadegan et al., 2013).

Within this framework, population density is not inherently perceived as a problem; rather, it is understood as a condition that fosters more complex social relationships (Lennert et al., 2015). While many studies associate high density in historic and deteriorated fabrics with increased vulnerability during crises, this perspective overlooks an important distinction: density becomes problematic primarily when structural instability impedes effective emergency response (Motevali Habibi & Barqchi, 2015). Where appropriate resilience measures are in place, density itself does not constitute a determining factor of vulnerability.

From a social perspective, despite the presence of multiple social challenges, these neighborhoods often exhibit stronger forms of community cohesion and neighborhood-oriented relationships compared to other urban fabrics. Although economic deprivation may limit participation capacity and reduce formal oversight (Nasr, 2017), these same conditions, through the presence of strong social ties, create opportunities for collective participation and community empowerment. In this regard, there exists a direct relationship between the socio-cultural characteristics of the resident population and their willingness to engage in the improvement and organization of vulnerable urban fabrics. Therefore, alongside conventional quantitative analyses, a qualitative, in-depth, and precise understanding of the demographic and social structure of the planning area is essential for planners and decision-makers (Habibi & Hasanzadeh Foomeshi, 2021).

At the same time, the strength of social ties enhances the usability and presence within public spaces, particularly when adequate open spaces are provided. Matthew Carmona, through examining place-based development experiences, argues that such urban open spaces, combined with the reinforcement of walkability, significantly improve various urban indicators. Pedestrian-oriented environments contribute to better physical and mental health, greater social cohesion and inclusivity, lower crime rates due to increased natural surveillance, and higher property values alongside increased investment attraction (Carmona, 2019). These social networks also provide greater capacity for passive defense, contributing to safety and a stronger sense of security among residents during disasters and crises (Mohammadi Sheshkal et al., 2019).

Economic challenges, as another major issue in these areas, can also be reconsidered through a place-based lens. The historical identity and cultural richness of these fabrics offer a counterbalance to economic deprivation. Given their significant heritage value and tourism potential, the development of local economies based on small-scale tourism can serve as one of the most effective strategies for addressing economic problems in these areas. In this sense, the range of opportunities embedded within these fabrics is such that

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urban planners can align each opportunity with one or more existing challenges, thereby advancing multiple development objectives simultaneously through the transformation of challenges into opportunities.

Accordingly, the place-based approach suggests that addressing the problems of historic and deteriorated fabrics should not be limited to focusing on their deficiencies alone. Rather, it must be accompanied by a deliberate and context-sensitive recognition of their place-based strengths and values, so that processes of development and problem-solving can proceed simultaneously and in an integrated manner (Table 3).

Table 3. Implementation requirements and policy measures. Source: authors

Level of Intervention	Core Requirement	Proposed Actions and Tools
Institutional–Legal	Reforming evaluation criteria of vulnerable fabrics	Revising Supreme Council indicators; incorporating qualitative dimensions such as social cohesion, sense of place, and land-use diversity
Participatory–Social	Empowerment and genuine community participation	Establishing neighborhood working groups, facilitation processes, participatory budgeting
Physical–Spatial	Prioritizing public space and walkability	Designing local squares, revitalizing alley-garden structures, integrating smart emergency infrastructure
Economic	Supporting identity-based local economies	Tax incentives for local businesses, support for small-scale tourism
Managerial	Cross-sectoral coordination	Establishing permanent place-based regeneration offices in cities (municipality, heritage, and planning authorities)

Conclusion

This study sought to reinterpret the concept of place-based development in relation to vulnerable urban fabrics particularly historic and deteriorated areas through a critical examination of the dominant positivist discourse in urban planning in Iran. The findings indicate that prevailing approaches, which primarily rely on quantitative indicators such as inaccessibility (street widths below six meters), fine-grained parcel structures (plots smaller than 200 square meters), and structural instability, are characterized by two fundamental limitations: physical reductionism and quantitative reductionism. Such perspectives tend to reduce these fabrics to "problematic" or "obsolete" areas and, as a result, promote interventions such as street widening, rapid renovation, or even large-scale clearance. These strategies have not only failed to address the underlying challenges but have also contributed to the disruption of social networks, the erosion of place identity, and the intensification of spatial and social disconnection.

In contrast, the place-based approach is grounded in the assumption that each urban fabric represents a unique entity shaped by its historical trajectory, collective memory, spatial configuration, and social relations. From this perspective, historic and deteriorated fabrics contrary to dominant interpretations possess a range of distinctive qualities that make them more "place-like" than other urban areas. These include a stronger sense of place, more cohesive social ties, a pronounced historical-spatial identity, neighborhood-oriented structures, a heightened sense of belonging, and a more prominent pedestrian lifestyle. Rather than being viewed as deficiencies, these characteristics can be understood as key assets that provide a foundation for development.

Accordingly, the distinction of development in these fabrics lies not only in their physical conditions but also in their socio-spatial complexity. The organic and irregular structure of their pathways, often perceived as a barrier within modern traffic-oriented logic, can instead support pedestrian interaction and lived experience. Similarly, population density, frequently regarded as a source of vulnerability, may function as a basis for stronger social cohesion and collective action. The prevalence of everyday pedestrian life contributes not only to social vitality but also to improved public health and informal surveillance. Furthermore, the historical identity embedded in these fabrics offers significant potential for the formation of local economies based on heritage, small-scale tourism, and creative industries.

Within this framework, the advantage of the place-based approach lies in its shift from a narrow focus on problem-solving toward a broader emphasis on recognizing and activating latent capacities. Rather than addressing each challenge in isolation, this approach seeks to align challenges with corresponding opportunities. Narrow streets can be reinterpreted as spaces for pedestrian-oriented life, density as a facilitator of social interaction, and economic deprivation as a condition that can be mitigated through heritage-based development strategies. In this sense, development becomes a process of transforming constraints into potentials.

At the same time, the realization of place-based development requires a set of institutional, social, spatial, and economic conditions. It necessitates a reconsideration of existing evaluation frameworks so that qualitative and place-related indicators such

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as social cohesion, sense of place, and cultural capital are incorporated alongside quantitative measures. It also depends on the meaningful participation of local communities, recognizing residents as primary stakeholders in planning and decision-making processes. Moreover, it calls for a shift in intervention strategies toward prioritizing public spaces, walkability, and incremental, context-sensitive improvements rather than large-scale demolition and reconstruction. Supporting local economies rooted in the historical and cultural identity of place is another essential component of this approach.

In conclusion, place-based development should be understood not merely as a technical method but as a strategic and interpretive framework through which the regeneration of vulnerable urban fabrics can be rethought. By focusing on strengthening existing capacities while addressing deficiencies, this approach offers a pathway toward more sustainable, identity-driven, and socially cohesive urban environments. Without revising dominant evaluation criteria and institutionalizing genuine community participation, however, even initiatives labeled as place-based risk reproducing the limitations of conventional approaches and perpetuating existing challenges.

Conflict of Interest

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

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