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Original Research Article

Analyzing the Physical-Functional Impacts of the Downtown Development Programs on Its Surrounding Historic Urban Fabrics

(Case Study: Sabzeh Meydan, Zanjan)

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ABSTRACT

The historic urban fabrics of Iranian cities—particularly in their central areas—face challenges such as physical deterioration and functional transformation. Downtown development programs, while aiming to enhance the quality of public spaces and strengthen urban functions, have in some cases disrupted historic structures and weakened neighborhood cohesion. This study aims to examine the physical and functional impacts of the Sabzeh Meydan development project in Zanjan on the historical core and its surrounding urban fabric.

The research employed a descriptive–analytical approach based on a case study. Data were collected through library resources, official development documents, and field observations of user behavior. The gathered data was analyzed using content analysis and logical reasoning.

The findings indicate that although the Sabzeh Meydan project has improved spatial quality, social interactions, and public presence, it has simultaneously weakened the historical hierarchy and local collective spaces by replacing the fine-grained neighborhood network with large, integrated urban spaces. The decline in the diversity of social, commercial, and religious functions at the neighborhood scale and the concentration of activities in the city center have reduced local vitality, limited accessibility, and increased the presence of non-local users. However, southern interventions—such as pedestrianization and the revitalization of Sabzeh Meydan—have enhanced citywide accessibility, visual connectivity, and social activity at a broader urban scale.

The results emphasize that the success of urban development programs in historic contexts requires balancing physical and functional considerations, maintaining neighborhood social ties, and improving quality of life. The study concludes that place-based interventions and context-sensitive development strategies can enhance urban performance while preserving the integrity of the historic fabric.

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Introduction

Historic urban fabrics in Iranian cities—particularly in central areas—often face challenges in balancing the preservation of heritage values with the improvement of living conditions. Physical deterioration, socioeconomic changes, and functional transformations have weakened the integrity and vitality of these areas. Among the common urban policies addressing such challenges are downtown development programs, implemented to revitalize and reorganize historic cores. Over the past decades, the central districts of many Iranian cities have witnessed development-oriented interventions primarily aimed at improving public space quality, upgrading infrastructure, and enhancing spatial efficiency. However, interventions within historic contexts have often encountered multiple challenges and, in some cases, have led to a decline in urban functionality.

The historic core of Zanjan, particularly the Sabzeh Meydan precinct, represents both the historical and economic center of the city. In recent years, it has been the focus of several development projects aimed at spatial and functional improvement. The Sabzeh Meydan Development Plan, as a case of downtown intervention within a historic context, provides an opportunity to examine the interaction between urban development and historical continuity. According to the theoretical framework of urban regeneration, development interventions should simultaneously preserve place identity, enhance livability, strengthen social activity, and regenerate meaning within public spaces (Carmona, 2010; Lotfi et al., 2022). On the other hand, similar experiences show that implementing development programs without adequate historical, social, and spatial considerations can intensify the disconnection between the historic urban fabric and new urban transformations. Therefore, analyzing such projects can provide a clearer picture of the potentials and challenges of development in historic areas and contribute to a deeper understanding of the need to balance urban development with the preservation of historical and cultural values in urban planning (Friedman, 1993).

The main aim of this study is to identify and analyze the impacts of downtown development programs on the surrounding historic fabric, and to explore how the identity and historical values of such areas can be preserved while meeting the contemporary needs of citizens. The main research question addresses how the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project in Zanjan has influenced the surrounding historic urban fabric.

To refine the investigation, the following sub-questions are also posed:

I. What are the physical and functional impacts of the downtown development project on the surrounding historic fabric and the spatial use patterns?

II. Which development goals have been effectively achieved, and which have encountered deficiencies?

Accordingly, this study focuses on the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project in Zanjan, conducting a critical analysis of its physical and functional consequences on the historic context. The study seeks to answer the above questions while clarifying the requirements and considerations necessary for balanced and context-sensitive interventions in historic urban centers. Ultimately, it aims to deepen the understanding of how equilibrium can be established between urban development and the preservation of historical and cultural values within urban planning frameworks.

Literature Review

Urban development and regeneration, as a multidimensional and interdisciplinary process, reflects the interaction between theory, implementation approaches, and policymaking. It aims to enhance the spatial, social, and economic quality of historic or deteriorated urban fabrics and provides a basis for intervention and urban management. Pourahmad et al. (2023) examined sustainable strategies and evaluation frameworks through the extraction and analysis of urban regeneration principles. Their study emphasizes that applying these concepts can serve as a guiding framework for effective interventions in deteriorated urban fabrics. Similarly, Setayeshmehr et al. (2022) compared urban regeneration and urban conservation, presenting these two approaches as distinct yet complementary frameworks that can be integrated to enhance the quality of urban spaces.

On the other hand, Fallahat and Garshasbi (2024), within a dual framework connecting cultural landscape and urban regeneration, emphasized the theoretical and practical linkage between cultural–spatial values and revitalization actions. Referring to the two components of "cultural values over time" and "principles of urban regeneration," they proposed a framework that fosters synergy between theory and practice in the regeneration process.

In the context of the destruction of historic fabrics, Pourhosseini et al. (2024), focusing on the historic area surrounding the Razavi Shrine in Mashhad, analyzed the economic and managerial motivations behind deliberate demolitions and identified infill

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design and reconstruction as effective strategies for heritage revitalization. Their study indicates that such strategies can simultaneously preserve heritage and strengthen social, economic, and identity dimensions. Furthermore, Andelib's (2023) research on the renewal of deteriorated urban fabrics, based on the balanced renewal theory, demonstrates that the lack of balance among social, physical, and managerial dimensions disrupts the renewal process and leads to urban decay. The proposed solution involves redefining urban renewal on three fundamental principles—justice-oriented, people-centered, and neighborhood-based—which can serve as a foundation for developing an effective renewal governance framework.

From the perspective of development policy and governance, the book Urban Development Policy shows that urban development is the outcome of interactions among social, economic, and political forces, and that state intervention is not the only determining factor. This perspective highlights the importance of local coalitions and the role of civil institutions in advancing regeneration and development objectives (Stone & Sanders, 1987).

Urban development policies also exert multiple impacts on historic urban fabrics. In some cases, such as Bristol and Shanghai, local regulatory frameworks and adaptive reuse strategies integrate historic buildings into contemporary economic activities while preserving a recognizable historic character. Specific studies report that when development policies are supported by legal controls, adequate funding, and active community participation (Barrett, 1996; Zhong & Chen, 2017), conservation measures can effectively counterbalance the pressures of redevelopment.

The reviewed studies can be categorized and analyzed into three main groups: theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented. Together, they provide a coherent framework for understanding and intervening in historic urban fabrics. First, theoretical studies have focused on revisiting the conceptual foundations of urban regeneration, extracting strategies, approaches, and conceptual frameworks that pave the way for the development of integrated models between urban regeneration and conservation. In the practical dimension, field-based and problem-oriented research, through examining experiences in deteriorated and historic fabrics, has proposed strategies such as infill design, targeted reconstruction, and balanced renewal as responses to physical, social, and managerial challenges. The policy-oriented studies, at a broader scale, focus on urban development policymaking. Relying on urban development programs and comparative analyses, they emphasize the significance of local institutions, regulatory frameworks, and community participation in achieving conservation goals and mediating conflicts arising from development pressures. The interweaving of these theoretical, practical, and policy dimensions provides an integrated perspective for analysis and action in the urban regeneration process, highlighting that success in this process depends on the synergy of interdisciplinary knowledge, social participation, the use of innovative technologies, and strategic coherence in policymaking.

The findings of previous studies show that the approaches adopted in earlier research are not, on their own, capable of providing a complete and precise reading of urban regeneration and conservation processes in historic contexts, as each addresses only a portion of the theoretical, practical, or policy dimensions of the issue. This study addresses this gap by examining the case study from both policy and practice perspectives, thereby offering a more comprehensive basis for understanding and intervening in historic urban fabrics. Focusing on the physical and functional consequences of development programs in the downtown area and the historic fabric of Zanjan, it seeks to fill the existing gap in field-based evaluations of how such interventions affect spatial perception and structure. Adopting an analytical–critical approach, the research emphasizes the interaction between downtown development policies and the historical characteristics of place, and provides a basis for rethinking intervention strategies in historic urban areas.

Previous studies have mainly concentrated on the theoretical dimensions of urban regeneration, conservation strategies, or the analysis of physical elements. However, fewer works have undertaken an integrated analysis of the impacts of downtown development programs on local historic fabrics and their physical–functional consequences. This study, through an analytical–critical lens and with a focus on the Sabzeh Meydan case in Zanjan, explores the contradictory impacts of development programs on the historic setting. Unlike many studies that tend to provide a predominantly positive or negative evaluation of development programs, this dual perspective highlights the necessity of balancing metropolitan-scale development objectives with

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the preservation of local values. The novelty of this research lies in its analysis of physical and functional criteria through the assessment of development impacts, as well as in proposing a framework for targeted and balanced interventions in historic urban fabrics.

Theoretical Foundations

The concept of development in contemporary policy and planning literature is a multifaceted and dynamic notion that has undergone fundamental transformations over time. Initially, development was regarded as synonymous with economic growth, industrialization, and modernization (Apter, 1967). However, over time—through the accumulation of diverse experiences and theoretical critiques—its definition evolved to encompass human, cultural, environmental, and social dimensions (Todaro & Smith, 2009). The primary goal shifted toward improving living conditions, enhancing public participation, and promoting the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within society.

Etymologically, the Latin root of the term "development" conveys a qualitative meaning associated with unfolding, evolution, and understanding, as opposed to the purely quantitative notion of "growth," which simply denotes expansion. Therefore, development is not only distinct from economic growth but is also viewed as a multidimensional process that, beyond increasing production and income, emphasizes improving quality of life, social justice, and cultural dynamism (Azkia & Ghaffari, 2014, 24). Development is thus a dynamic and multi-level process inherently linked to economic growth (Moren, 2003), yet it remains a complex social phenomenon that requires contextual, institutional, and human analysis (Rabie, 2016, 19). (Fig.1). Balanced, place-sensitive development occurs when a dynamic, two-way relationship is established between society, place, and planning, such that planning is not imposed in a purely top-down manner or based solely on physical or economic indicators. Instead, it must be rooted in the needs, values, and capacities of local communities and their spatial contexts. Such an approach not only improves physical and economic conditions but also contributes to better living environments, the organization of human spaces, the strengthening of place identity, the enhancement of social capital, and the improvement of quality of life at both local and citywide scales.

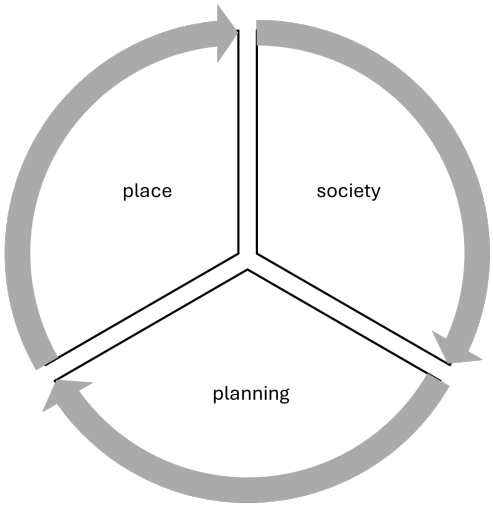


Fig.1. Core components of the concept of development. Source: Authors

Within this framework, city-center development is understood as an approach focused on improving the quality, efficiency, and functional role of the main urban core. It seeks to upgrade infrastructure, reinforce central functions, enhance accessibility, and create effective linkages with the surrounding urban fabric. A development strategy of this kind—aimed at increasing the functionality, performance, and attractiveness of the center in support of economic, social, and cultural activities, while acknowledging historical, identity-related, and social dimensions—can stimulate the regeneration and revitalization of central urban spaces and help prevent spatial inequalities and fragmentation. The center is the most important and defining element in the spatial and objective–subjective organization of the city. It is a concept with a specific place and characteristics that is manifested in physical, functional, and symbolic layers shaped by collective memory, sense of place, urban identity, and its associated symbols. The center acts as the core and equivalent of the whole city—its distilled essence and the locus of its major events (Mansouri, 2007, 51; Mokhles, 2017, 16).

Historic cores, as the primary structural framework of cities throughout history, have played a crucial role, and the city center is considered part of this historic core whose formation, continuity, and functioning are deeply interconnected with the surrounding physical and symbolic elements. According to the International Council on Monuments and Sites, the centers of historic towns express the historical character of the city and consist of a set of physical and intangible elements that embody its urban form and image (ICOMOS, 1987).

In traditional Iranian cities, the center has not

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necessarily coincided with the geometric center. Rather, through the spontaneous overlap of functional and symbolic layers—by concentrating activities in both symbolic (political, social, and religious) and functional terms—it has operated as the cultural embodiment of society and the focal point of social, economic, and political life (Mansouri et al., 2020; Abarghouei & Mansouri, 2021). To sustain habitation and enhance living quality over different historical periods, these cores have been subject to various forms of intervention. While earlier interventions mainly focused on individual monuments and physical aspects, contemporary approaches increasingly tend toward addressing the broader urban fabric and structure across multiple dimensions.

• The Role of Historic Urban Fabric in Development Projects

In recent decades, cities have been recognized as places with the greatest growth potential, yet they are simultaneously confronted with significant development challenges (Sivaev, 2015). Evaluating the experience of purely objective approaches to development reveals that such programs have largely failed to ensure human and social satisfaction. Moreover, the growing body of knowledge addressing objective–subjective dualities has influenced development discourse, indicating that shifts in how key dimensions of human life are understood cannot be separated from transformations in development concepts (Mansouri, 2023). Recent development experiences show that an exclusive focus on objective dimensions—without accounting for human perception—cannot lead to place-based development or improved quality of life. Reductionist and purely objective approaches, which prioritize rapid growth and large-scale planning, have often overlooked the complex subjective, historical, and cultural dimensions of local contexts. Yet the quality of human life emerges from a combined perception of both the tangible and intangible dimensions of space. Therefore, an integrated understanding of context and place-based development is essential for enhancing the quality of urban spaces. Historic neighborhoods and fabrics are integral components of urban space, and the quality criteria used for urban spaces apply to them as well. The factors influencing the quality of urban spaces can be examined in both physical and functional dimensions. Physical factors are among the key determinants of the quality and efficiency of urban spaces (Mardomi & Qamari, 2011), including hierarchy, territoriality, scale, neighborhood-scale collective spaces (Habibi, 2002), accessibility, spatial proportions, dimensions, geometry, and spaces for pause and movement (Salehi-Nia & Memarian, 2009).

Moreover, beyond its physical dimensions, place is perceived and endowed with meaning in the minds of users through people and their activities (Abarghouei-Fard, 2023). Accordingly, functional criteria are also crucial in defining an effective development pattern. Functional attributes such as land-use diversity (Rishbeth, 2001), functional mix (social–commercial–religious) (Gehl, 2013, 146–147), availability of amenities and facilities (Cattell et al., 2008), legibility (Montello, 2007), and privacy and control over transitions from public to private spaces (Pakzad, 2007, 8) are among the key functional components shaping urban spaces.

The functional mix and diversity of activities within the physical organization of urban spaces encourage people's presence and, by enabling continuous use of space, constitute an important factor in the success of public spaces (Jacobs, 2007, 35–36) and in sustaining the social roles of residents within their neighborhood and living environment (Abarghouei et al., 2020). In Iranian cities, neighborhood centers—located at the intersections of main thoroughfares and characterized by local service facilities and communal spaces—play a significant physical and functional role; however, in light of recent transformations, they now require redefinition (ibid., 2020; Najari & Mahdinejad, 2020). Ultimately, the literature review shows that historic cores and neighborhoods, as key components in relation to the urban center, are not only carriers of physical and heritage values but also living settings for social interaction. However, in many metropolitan-scale development programs, their role has been overlooked, leading to a weakening of social ties and a decline in quality of life. Therefore, attention to physical and functional criteria is essential for place-based urban regeneration and the enhancement of quality of life.

Accordingly, linking the theoretical discussions to the subject of this research is of particular importance, as it indicates that development schemes such as the Sabzeh Meydan project in Zanjan can only be considered successful if they establish a balanced relationship between physical and functional dimensions and the identity-related and social layers of place. This theoretical standpoint provides the basis for the case-based evaluation of the Sabzeh Meydan project and constitutes the framework within which

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its effects on the historic fabric and surrounding neighborhoods are analyzed.

In line with this, the present study aims to examine the impacts of downtown development programs on historic neighborhoods and to interpret physical and functional criteria within urban development projects in historic contexts, analyzing the dimensions and effects of development within the framework of regenerating the center and its surrounding historic neighborhoods. Fig. 2 presents the conceptual model derived from the literature used in this research. This conceptual model structurally illustrates the core components of city-center development along three main axes—society, place, and planning—and highlights the role of these elements in shaping the process of place-based development. The different dimensions and impacts of place-based development are then categorized into four groups—physical, functional, social, and identity-related—of which the present study focuses on the physical and functional dimensions.

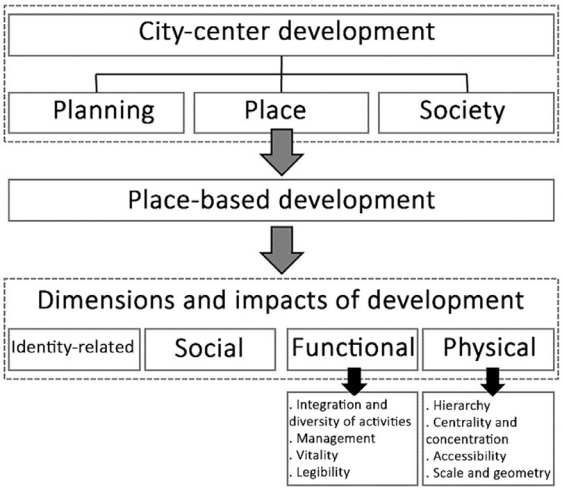


Fig. 2. Conceptual Model of the Research. Source: Authors.

• Research Methodology

Based on the discussions reviewed in the literature, which emphasize the importance of linking physical, functional, social, and identity dimensions in place-based development, the research methodology of this study was designed. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the physical–functional dimensions are influenced in the process of developing the historical city center and to evaluate their impacts on the surrounding urban fabric. Therefore, this research is descriptive–analytical in nature, adopting a qualitative approach and employing a case study method. The objective is to examine the impacts of downtown development programs on the historic fabric, with the Sabzeh Meydan of Zanjan selected as the case study. Data collection was conducted in two main stages. In the first stage, information was gathered through library studies, documents, and previous research, leading to a conceptual understanding of urban development. In the second stage, the required data were collected through field surveys, direct observation of user behavior in space, and on-site visits, aimed at assessing the alignment of development programs with the conceptual components derived from the theoretical framework. In addition, development documents and plans related to the case study were analyzed to assess their effects on the Sabzeh Meydan area. The findings were examined using content analysis and logical reasoning methods to evaluate the extent to which development programs have influenced the historical core of the city and its surrounding fabric. Finally, the analyzed results were categorized into effects, advantages, disadvantages, and strategies employed in the development programs of historic urban fabrics (see Fig. 3).

Research Area

The present study was conducted in the city of Zanjan, one of the major urban centers in northwestern Iran.

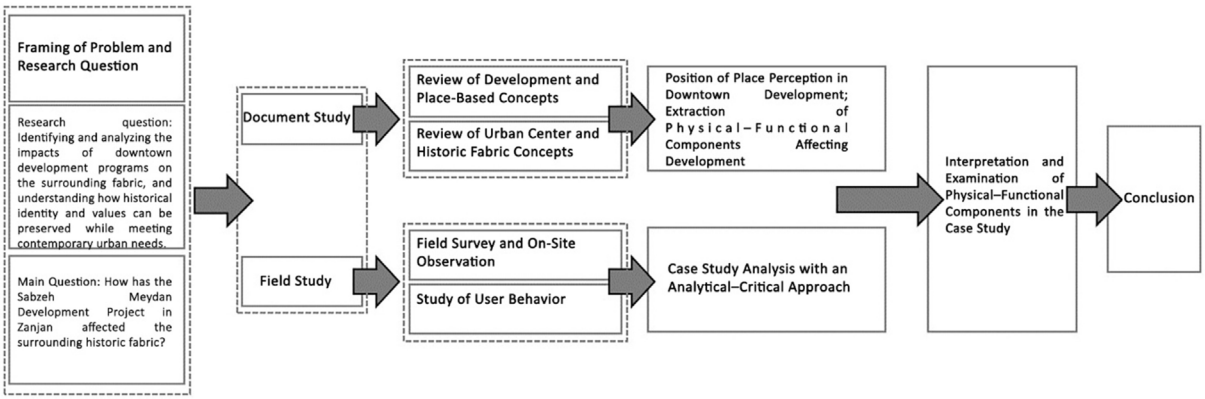


Fig. 3. Research process. Source: Author.

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Zanjan, specifically the Sabzeh Meydan precinct and the surrounding historic neighborhoods (see Fig. 4). Sabzeh Meydan has historically served as the city's center and one of its most significant public spaces, functioning as the focal point of social, cultural, and economic interactions. The historic fabric around Sabzeh Meydan—comprising the ancient urban cores and key nodes of the city's spatial–social structure—holds a prominent position within Zanjan's spatial and functional organization. This historic fabric, due to its proximity to key urban elements such as the bazaar, the Jame Mosque, caravanserais, and traditional commercial routes (rasteh), has developed a coherent and legible spatial structure that has persisted over time through the economic, religious, and cultural activities of its residents. Owing to its central position and the intersection of major urban routes, this area has become a focal setting for gatherings, exchanges, and various social and economic activities, functioning as a connective node between the Zanjan Bazaar, the Jame Mosque, and Imam Street. These three prominent urban elements—because of their spatial proximity and functional interrelation—form a continuous and integrated structure, with Sabzeh Meydan located at its core. The bazaar serves as the economic backbone, the Jame Mosque as the religious–social center, and Imam Street as a symbol of modern urban planning; together, they have shaped and sustained the vitality of the city center.

As an open public space within the historic core, Sabzeh Meydan holds a significant place in the collective memory of the citizens, serving as a venue for rituals, gatherings, and everyday social interactions. This multilayered role has made Sabzeh Meydan a key element in the spatial, functional, and identity structure of Zanjan.

The Sabzeh Meydan Project has been designed and implemented in three main parts: the primary pedestrian route along Imam Street, the central (southern) square-like open space, and the northern section (see Fig. 5). In the southern area, public spaces—comprising linear pedestrian paths and nodal plazas—have been developed in qualitative alignment with the site's spatial characteristics and its surrounding landmarks. Conversely, as shown in Fig. 4, the northern part of the project extends into the historic neighborhoods, altering their traditional structure. Development in this northern section has been quantitative in nature, covering a broad area without adequate consideration of the site's contextual features. The selection of this area as the research domain stems from its pivotal position within the city's spatial organization and its role as a link between the historic fabric and the dynamics of contemporary urban life.

Discussion

Urban interventions in historic fabrics—particularly in the form of development and regeneration projects—are often challenged by the need to balance the preservation of authenticity with responsiveness to contemporary urban needs. The Sabzeh Meydan Development Project in Zanjan serves as a notable example in this regard. Aimed at enhancing urban environmental quality, revitalizing social life, and reinforcing connections with key historic landmarks, the project has brought about significant transformations within the city's historic core.

These transformations, ranging from physical interventions that altered the dimensions and geometry of spaces to the redefinition of functions and access routes, have affected the spatial structure and social relationships of the surrounding neighborhoods. Examining these aspects provides a deeper understanding of how the Sabzeh Meydan development has influenced the continuity of neighborhood life, the city's spatial organization, and its historical identity.

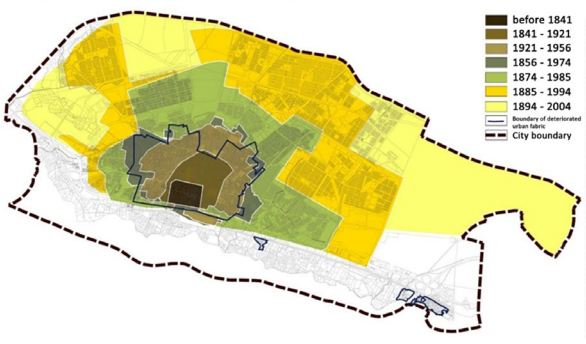


Fig. 4. City boundaries during different historical periods. Source: Sabat Tarh Ara Consulting Engineers, 2022.



Fig. 5. Map of the study area: Sabzeh Meydan, Zanjan, and the surrounding historic fabric. Source: Authors, based on Google Earth.

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Based on the theoretical framework established earlier—where development is defined as a multidimensional and place-based process—this section analyzes the extent to which development programs have influenced the physical and functional dimensions of the area, seeking to understand how a dynamic connection between place and development can be achieved. Accordingly, through an analytical approach, the impacts and consequences of the development programs are examined in two dimensions—physical and functional—within Sabzeh Meydan and its surrounding historic fabric.

In the physical dimension, the components studied include hierarchy, pause and movement, accessibility, dimensions, and geometry; while in the functional dimension, the focus is on integration and diversity of activities, privacy, and legibility.

• Physical Factors

- Hierarchy

The spatial organization of historic urban fabrics is structured upon a hierarchical system characterized by a gradual transition from public to semi-public and then to private domains. This spatial gradation plays a vital role in creating physical continuity and social security within streets, neighborhood centers, and house entrances (Habibi, 2002). Following the implementation of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project in Zanjan (see Fig. 6), the project's location and layout have influenced the structure and boundaries of the surrounding neighborhoods, introducing a modern configuration into the organic fabric of the traditional quarters and resulting in the partial demolition of several neighborhoods.

Consequently, the hierarchical spatial structure of adjacent neighborhoods—such as Nasrollah Khan, Dalan Alti, Sabzeh Meydan, and Bazaar—has been disrupted. Whereas the traditional neighborhood system was based on a gradual transition from public to semi-public and finally to private spaces, the interventions introduced by the project have eliminated these spatial layers, creating direct and unmediated connections between the neighborhoods and the public space. After the execution of the project, the neighborhoods—which in the traditional urban system functioned as semi-private domains and settings for intra-neighborhood interaction—became exposed to the fast-moving and boundaryless flows of the wider urban space. This has eroded the spatial, perceptual, and functional distinctions between domains. Another consequence of this disruption is the weakening or loss of small-scale neighborhood centers and collective spaces, which previously served as the grounds for neighborly relationships, everyday interactions, and a sense of place. The elimination or marginalization of these centers has led to social fragmentation and reduced internal cohesion within the neighborhoods.

In essence, the loss of gradual spatial rhythm has diminished spatial integrity and the potential for stable neighborhood relations, replacing them with a homogeneous and transitional space. This condition has not only decreased the quality of life in the surrounding urban fabric but has also disrupted the natural linkage between the neighborhoods and the city's public realm.

- Pause and Movement

Pause spaces, in connection with movement paths, create a network of collective spaces at the neighborhood scale that, in addition to fulfilling functional needs, foster social interaction, human presence, and moments of pause (Dehnad et al., 2020), thereby strengthening local cohesion. In this sense, small-scale spaces play both functional and identity roles, and the interrelation between movement and pause spaces is a key factor in shaping the quality of social life within historic neighborhoods (Carr et al., 2008; Rupp et al., 2020; Strong, 2007).

In the past, the neighborhood centers surrounding

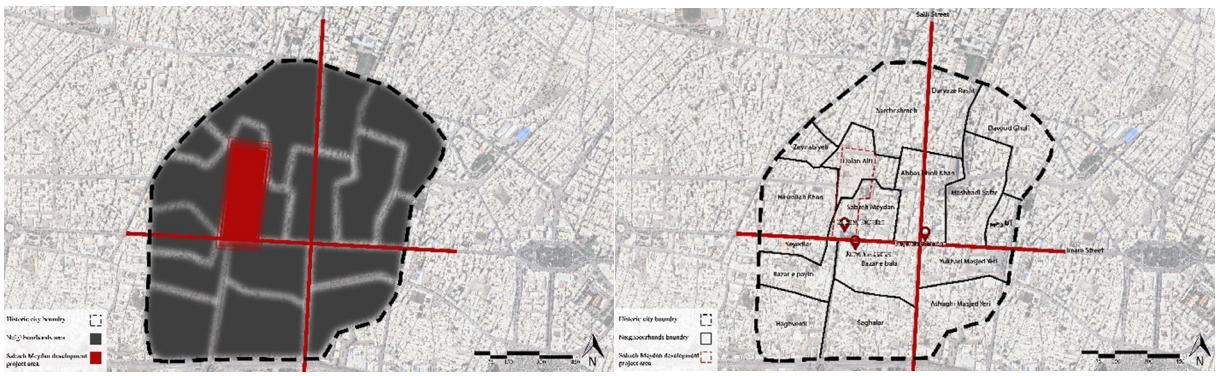


Fig. 6. Boundaries of the historic neighborhoods and location of the Sabzeh Meydan project. Source: Authors

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Sabzeh Meydan in Zanjan played a vital role in organizing spaces of movement, pause, and gathering. As small-scale focal points, they provided settings for social interaction, religious ceremonies, and residents' everyday activities. These spaces—manifested as hosseiniyehs (religious gathering halls), passageways, small squares, and other local collective spaces—not only met functional needs but also carried identity values and reinforced social bonds (see Fig. 7). With the implementation of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project, a large portion of these neighborhoods and communal spaces—particularly in the Hosseiniyeh, Nasrollah Khan, Sabzeh Meydan, and parts of Sarcheshmeh and Zeinabiyeh neighborhoods—were demolished, and their functions were transferred to the new project area. One of the most significant consequences of this transformation was the replacement of small-scale, organically developed spaces with a unified, large-scale space in the northern section of the project, which now serves the entire city rather than the immediate neighborhood (Fig. 8). As a result, the functional and symbolic role of neighborhood centers has been reduced to a memory-based and occasional character, with many collective spaces now reactivated only temporarily or during periodic events.

- **Accessibility**

The network of historic streets was organized based on neighborhood divisions, functional hierarchies, and spatial hierarchy. Gozars (traditional pathways) served both urban and local roles within the urban fabric. At the neighborhood scale, these passageways not only provided local services but also facilitated access to other urban and social centers. Moreover, they strengthened neighborly relationships and contributed to maintaining social security within the neighborhood (Habibi, 2003).

In the historic structure of Zanjan, the gradation of pathways was clearly identifiable, and local routes were directly connected to neighborhood centers and small-scale community activities. However, with the implementation of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project, accessibility to neighborhoods was severely disrupted. Many of the minor, local access routes that once connected the project's edges to neighborhood boundaries were removed, and large-scale urban access routes replaced them.

This change disrupted the natural connections between neighborhoods and public urban spaces, while also reducing neighborhood-level security. The removal of fine-grained access paths diminished residents' social surveillance, thereby increasing instability along neighborhood boundaries. Furthermore, the pedestrian-oriented design of the Sabzeh Meydan project and the relocation of vehicular traffic to the surrounding ring roads intensified congestion along the peripheral streets and neighborhood edges. This condition not only compromised accessibility for residents but also reduced their daily quality of life and imposed additional pressure on the local street network.

- **Dimensions and Geometry**

The dimensions and geometry of neighborhoods within historic fabrics were originally shaped by human scale and vernacular spatial patterns. Through gradual and adaptive evolution, they harmoniously coexisted with larger urban elements, creating a natural continuity between small neighborhood spaces and citywide urban areas. The gradual



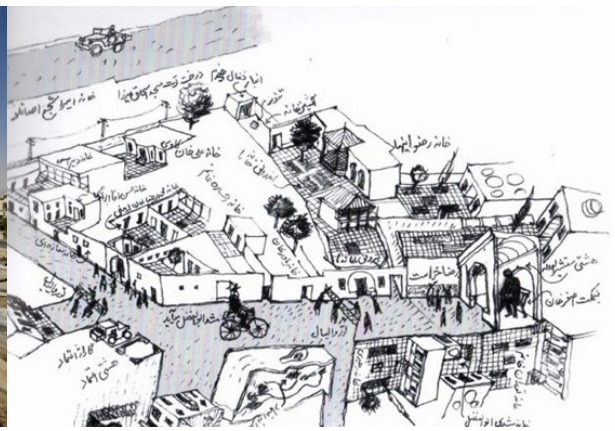


Fig. 7. Abstract depiction of pause points and neighborhood-scale collective spaces with local identity, from the Sarcheshmeh and Dalan Alti neighborhoods toward Nasrollah Khan and Sabzeh Meydan (right). Source: Saremi, 2010, p. 20.

Fig. 8. Current condition of the Sabzeh Meydan project area, illustrating the replacement of small-scale collective spaces with a large, unified open space (left). Source: Almasi, 2024.

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variation of scale and context-responsive geometry facilitated the formation of neighborhood centers, pause points, and spaces that strengthened social interaction among residents. The replacement of this organic structure with a rigid, prescriptive geometry—featuring dimensions incompatible with the local scale and the introduction of large-scale spaces—led to environments no longer limited to residents. The increased presence of non-local users weakened social cohesion and eroded local identity.

As shown in Fig. 9, the Sabzeh Meydan development altered the dimensions and geometry of surrounding spaces, transforming the fine-grained historic neighborhood structure. By inserting large-scale nodes into the dense urban fabric, the project eliminated natural geometry and human-scale proportions, replacing the gradual transition between small neighborhood spaces and larger urban areas with uniform, imposed geometries. These changes have weakened or eliminated neighborhood centers, reduced the settings for local social interaction, increased the influx of non-local users, and diminished residents' sense of place. Ultimately, this process has disrupted the historical and social continuity between the historic neighborhoods and other urban spaces.

Overall, from a physical perspective, the interventions of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project—by introducing large, unified spaces in place of the fine-grained neighborhood network—have disrupted the spatial hierarchy and coherence of the historic neighborhoods. While the project has eliminated part of the local access routes, it has also widened major pathways and created pedestrian axes that enhance large-scale connectivity to key urban landmarks and improve pedestrian movement.

However, these changes have simultaneously produced negative effects on vehicular traffic, residents' lifestyles, and the continuity between neighborhoods and public urban spaces. Alterations in geometry and scale, the loss of human-scale proportions, and the increased presence of non-local users have further diminished the quality of collective spaces, neighborhood-level social interactions, and the residents' sense of place.

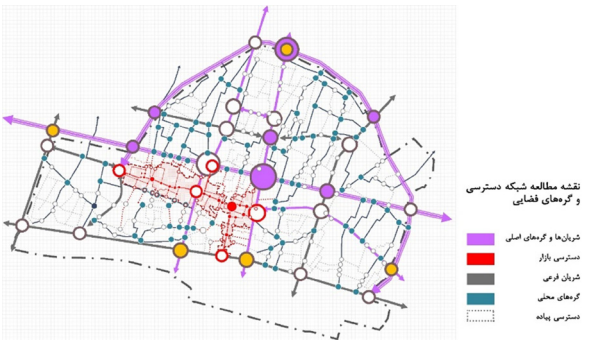


Fig. 9. Map of access networks and spatial nodes within the spatial organization of Zanjan's historic urban fabric. Source: Authors, based on Sabat Tarh Ara Consulting Engineers, 2022.

Therefore, although the Sabzeh Meydan project has improved citywide accessibility, introduced pedestrian-oriented spaces, and expanded public areas, it has had a profound impact on the physical structure, spatial integrity, and neighborhood identity of the surrounding historic fabric—ultimately leading to the weakening of its spatial coherence and local character.

• Functional Factors

- Integration and Diversity of Activities

In historic urban fabrics, land-use diversity at the neighborhood scale is among the most significant factors contributing to environmental vitality and continuous human presence. This diversity typically emerged through the coexistence of commercial, religious, and residential functions, thereby creating a dynamic foundation for social life within neighborhoods (Abarghouei et al., 2020). Along these lines, the functional integration of social, economic, and religious activities held a fundamental role in historic neighborhoods — a combination that not only addressed residents' everyday needs but also strengthened social ties and sustained the neighborhood's cultural life (Jacobs, 2007, 35–36).

Studies of Zanjan's historic neighborhood structure also reveal a variety of social, commercial, and religious functions at the neighborhood scale, embodied in local centers, small bazaars, tekyehs (religious gathering spaces), and mosques. This functional diversity and integration not only fulfilled residents' daily needs within their neighborhood boundaries but also played a crucial role in maintaining vitality, liveliness, and social interaction.

However, following the implementation of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project, parts of the neighborhood fabric were demolished without regard for their physical and functional continuity. As a result, many small-scale neighborhood functions and activities disappeared. Consequently, residents now rely on the city center to meet their daily needs, as most essential services have become concentrated in Sabzeh Meydan and the broader urban core.

This functional shift has centralized activities within the downtown core, severely weakening the social and economic vitality of the historic neighborhoods. The

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traditional local centers — once self-sufficient hubs of services and community life — have lost their roles or been entirely eliminated. The removal of small-scale businesses and everyday services, replaced by large-scale land uses, has not only diminished functional diversity and social vibrancy but also transformed the historic neighborhoods into rigid structures disconnected from residents' daily lives. Moreover, the introduction of cultural and tourism-related land uses in Sabzeh Meydan and its southern section has increased public presence and strengthened its citywide role. While these interventions have provided new opportunities for social and economic activity, they have simultaneously contributed to the weakening of the surrounding neighborhood fabric, even as they enhanced the central area's urban significance.

- **Privacy**

For humans, spatial domains are typically distinguished as either private or public. A private space defines the domain of one or several individuals, while a public space belongs to everyone (Tavasoli, 2011, p. 76). In the historic fabric of Zanjan, the spatial hierarchy — from public to semi-public and then private — served to preserve privacy and control entry into neighborhoods. However, according to historical maps and comparisons with the current layout, the expansion of Sabzeh Meydan and the interventions stemming from the development project have gradually erased these territorial layers, disrupting the natural boundaries between the square and its adjacent neighborhoods. The neighborhoods have consequently become directly and continuously connected to the public urban space (see Fig. 10). This direct, unmediated accessibility to local fabrics — without respecting spatial hierarchy — has led not only to the reduction of privacy and weakening of social control but also to the disruption of neighborhood-based supervision and everyday social relationships. As a result, the security and comfort of the inner neighborhood spaces have been compromised, while changes in movement patterns have seriously affected the spatial identity and integrity of the surrounding historic neighborhoods.

- **Legibility**

Legibility, as one of the key components of spatial perception and understanding, represents the ease with which users can identify, orient themselves, and comprehend the spatial structure of an environment (Lynch, 1960/1994). In historic neighborhoods and fabrics, legibility emerges from the natural



Fig.10. The loss of boundaries between the urban public space and the historic fabric. Source: Authors

interconnection between physical form, activities, and meaning, where distinctive elements such as passageways, small squares, neighborhood centers, mosques, and local bazaars act as spatial landmarks (ibid., 1960/1994; Nazif & Matlabi, 2019).

However, development programs often alter spatial, functional, and perceptual characteristics, thereby changing the degree of legibility within a space. Before the implementation of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project, the legibility of the surrounding historic neighborhoods arose naturally through the interplay between the built form and everyday social activities. Key spatial elements—such as neighborhood centers, alleys, small plazas, bazaars, and religious spaces—not only served functional purposes but also acted as local landmarks that enabled residents to identify, navigate, and understand their surroundings. This local model of legibility stemmed from social relationships and residents' daily needs, and thus was deeply integrated with their everyday life. After the implementation of the project, however, legibility was redefined and interpreted differently. Instead of relying on local elements and small-scale social spaces, it was reoriented toward an urban-scale model, based on large-scale design principles. The creation of expansive open surfaces, wide visual corridors, and the removal of the fine-grained structure of historic neighborhoods shifted perceptual landmarks from the neighborhood to the city scale. Although this enhanced legibility at the macro-urban level, it simultaneously weakened local legibility, diminished neighborhood identity, and disrupted the natural connection between the physical fabric and social activities. Ultimately, the interventions of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project—through changes in land use, replacement or redesign of historic buildings, and removal of identity-bearing elements—have undermined the continuity of local

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functions, reduced the residents' sense of place, and caused cultural and social fragmentation within the fabric. The demolition of parts of the historic context for visual openness or redevelopment has also led to the loss of historical layers and decreased spatial cohesion. As illustrated in Fig. 11, social activity across the square has become unevenly distributed: the highest levels of activity occur in the southern areas near major landmarks such as the bazaar and the Jame Mosque, while the northern sections, due to weak connections with surrounding neighborhoods and a lack of identity-defining elements, experience less presence and activity.

In general, the project's focus on physical and functional interventions—with limited attention to social and identity dimensions—has created a gap between planning objectives and the realization of place-based development within the historic setting. From an urban development perspective, the project has been primarily oriented toward tangible, physical–functional changes, with insufficient emphasis on the foundational components of sustainable, context-sensitive development. This gap highlights that place-based development in historic contexts can only be meaningful when physical revitalization is pursued in parallel with social, spatial, and identity-oriented considerations.

Findings and Analysis

The Sabzeh Meydan Development Project in Zanjan, aimed at organizing, updating, and revitalizing the city's central fabric, has introduced a series of extensive physical and functional interventions within the area's historic structure, leading to a redefinition of the square's role in urban life. The project was developed in three phases — including baseline studies and analysis, conceptual design, and detailed design — with an approach focused on revitalizing the historic structure, restoring spatial legibility, and strengthening functional and visual connections among key urban elements such as the traditional bazaar, caravanserais, and the Jame Mosque. Its main strategies are based on enhancing pedestrian orientation, reducing vehicular intrusion, organizing open spaces, reconstructing facades, and redefining the square's cultural and social role. According to field observations conducted during the summer of 2025, continuous citizen presence and the occurrence of social activities were recorded in the southern section of the project, adjacent to the historic bazaar and the Jame Mosque. Pedestrian counts at different times of day (morning, afternoon, and evening) revealed that the highest levels of activity occurred during evenings, weekends, and public events, when the square functioned as one of the busiest focal points in the city center. In this regard, the creation of pedestrian routes, widening of main pathways, and establishment of visual and spatial openness have improved access to historic elements while enabling the formation of a unified public space that encourages citizen presence (see Fig. 12). These interventions have not only enhanced the square's urban role and facilitated movement and social interaction but also provided a suitable setting for cultural and touristic activities. Consequently, the project has contributed to increased vitality, social engagement, and public accessibility, while also fostering identity regeneration and establishing Sabzeh Meydan as a renewed focal point of the historic urban fabric and a supra-neighborhood space in the heart of Zanjan.

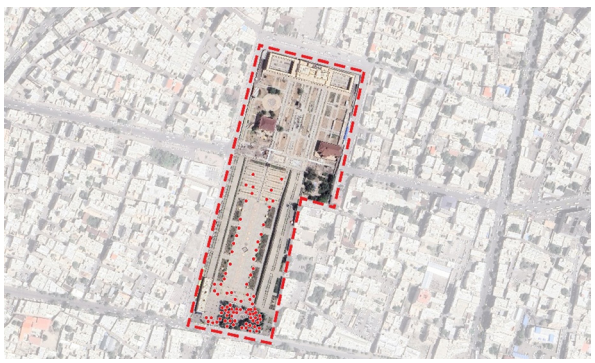


Fig. 11. Level of public engagement in the northern and southern sections of the Sabzeh Meydan project, based on environmental observation and users' spatial behavior. Source: Authors.

Despite the positive objectives of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project in Zanjan, its extensive interventions have produced significant physical and functional consequences for the surrounding historic fabric and neighborhood life. Based on direct observation, behavioral studies, and interviews conducted with residents and shopkeepers, most respondents stated that following the project's implementation, neighborhood-level pedestrian activity and children's presence in local spaces have noticeably decreased.

As illustrated in Fig. 13, the removal of neighborhood centers, small-scale communal spaces, and local access networks has disrupted spatial hierarchy, weakened social cohesion and traditional neighborly relations, and diminished the continuity of neighborhood life. Furthermore, the replacement of the organic geometry and human scale with uniform and prescriptive design patterns—alongside the

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Fig. 12. Formation of social life and citizen presence in the southern section of the Sabzeh Meydan project, Zanjan. Source: Authors



Fig. 13. A gradual process of the disappearance of Zanjan's historic city center fabric. Source: Authors, based on Google Earth and Zanjan024.ir (accessed August 3, 2025).

elimination of small businesses, local services, and ritual spaces—has reduced functional diversity, weakened residents' sense of belonging, and distanced the square from the everyday needs of urban life. Additionally, reconstructions inconsistent with traditional architectural patterns in facades and pavements, spatial homogenization, and the introduction of new access routes have undermined the historic axes, reduced the legibility of the traditional structure, disrupted historical layers, and diminished the heritage and historical value of Sabzeh Meydan and its surrounding fabric.

While the project's emphasis on beautification and functional redefinition based on tourism attraction has elevated the square's metropolitan role, it has simultaneously severed the natural link between the square and its social and cultural context, thereby weakening the local identity and traditional vitality of this part of the city. Through these interventions, many of the traditional and everyday functions that once animated the square and its surroundings have been displaced. The neighborhood-based structure—previously rooted in the integration of functions and social relations among residents—has been replaced by extensive urban spaces with large-scale, tourism-oriented functions. The physical interventions have disrupted the historical layers and diminished the heritage and historical values of Sabzeh Meydan and its environs. Furthermore, the project's focus on aesthetic enhancement and tourism-driven functionality has created a functional detachment from residents' everyday needs, weakening the natural relationship between the square and the living social fabric of the historic context. Field observations and analysis of the spatial structure of the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project in Zanjan, as presented in Table 1, indicate that spatial vitality and public engagement are primarily concentrated in the southern sections of the site, adjacent to key urban identity elements such as the historic bazaar, the Jame Mosque, and other significant buildings. The presence of these elements has enhanced spatial quality and increased social interactions within this area.

Conversely, as one moves toward the northern parts of the project, the intensity of social activities and public presence diminishes. This decline can be attributed to the lack of identity-defining elements and weak functional and spatial linkages with the surrounding neighborhoods and other parts of the city — a condition that reflects functional inequality within this urban space.

Conclusion

The approach to urban development and the regeneration of central and historic urban fabrics has been one of the main priorities in urban development

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Table 1. Analysis of objectives, actions, and impacts of development programs on the physical and functional dimensions of Sabzeh Meydan, Zanjan, and its surrounding historic fabric. Source: Authors.

Development impacts on historic neighborhoods			
Description	**Intervention**	**Num.**	**Development sides**
To revitalize and redefine the historical role of Sabzeh Meydan as the city center	objective	1	physical
To create coherent and legible open spaces	action		
Improving urban quality and spatial readability Increasing accessibility and spatial connectivity among historic elements Strengthening the sense of place and regenerating collective identity	Positive impact		
Damaging the neighborhood fabric and intensifying neighborhood identity erosion Removal of small-scale neighborhood spaces and local centers Increased pressure on surrounding street networks and local traffic	Negative impact		
To create an urban center and vast public space	objective	2	
Enhancing visual openness and organizing urban façades	action		
Enhancing urban aesthetics and improving the city's mental image Improving visual quality and residents' sense of the local environment Strengthening spatial legibility and attractiveness at the urban scale	Positive impact		
Homogenization and reduction of vernacular architectural authenticity Loss of human-scale proportions and gradual transitions of scale Disruption of the traditional spatial hierarchy	Negative impact		
To redefine the role of Sabzeh Meydan and surrounding neighborhoods as an urban core and social interaction hub	objective	3	Functional
Introducing social, cultural, and ritual functions within the square Substitution of non-local users' needs for those of local residents	action		
Strengthening social vitality Reviving Sabzeh Meydan as a center of communal life Attracting tourism and fostering economic activity at the urban scale	Positive impact		
Decline in the sense of belonging and local social relations Weakening of local (social, religious, and economic) activities	Negative impact		
To increase vitality and public engagement at the city scale	objective	4	
Defining functions and micro-spaces at the urban scale	action		
Enhancing spatial dynamism and vitality Increasing presence and use of space at different times of day Improving the quality of the citizen experience and reinforcing the square's role as an urban destination	Positive impact		
Weakening neighborhood identity and decline of neighborly relations Reduction of functional diversity in neighborhoods and removal of small-scale services Weakening of local activities (social, religious, and economic)	Negative impact		

programs in recent years. Accordingly, this study examined the historic fabric of Zanjan and the Sabzeh Meydan Regeneration Project, focusing on its physical and functional impacts on the city's historic core.

The results derived from the analysis of physical and functional factors within the project area indicate that urban interventions in historic contexts—if designed with consideration for access between the city center and the historic core and maintaining scale compatibility with the surrounding fabric—can lead to improvements in spatial and social quality. The southern section of the project, due to its proximity to key urban landmarks such as the historic bazaar and the Jame Mosque, represents a successful example of place-based regeneration. Through enhancing walkability, increasing public presence, and reinforcing the sense of place, this part of the project has redefined the role of the city center in the social and cultural life of Zanjan.

However, the project's northward expansion has generated considerable negative consequences due to disruptions in spatial hierarchy and the introduction of large-scale physical interventions inconsistent with the neighborhood structure. The demolition or weakening of historic neighborhood fabrics, the removal of small-scale neighborhood centers, the influx of non-local users, and the decline in residents' sense of place attachment are among the most significant outcomes. These changes have not only caused spatial and social fragmentation but also limited public engagement in the newly developed northern sections.

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This is because the northern area of the project is still perceived by residents and citizens as a neighborhood rather than an urban square, retaining some of its original local characteristics. This has created a duality and tension between the modern physical form of the project and its local identity, resulting in reduced functional coherence and diminished attractiveness for public presence in this part of the city.

Therefore, it can be concluded that while the Sabzeh Meydan Development Project has successfully enhanced the square's tourism function at the metropolitan scale, it has simultaneously produced a kind of functional and spatial duality at the local level. This duality has, on the one hand, increased urban presence and vitality within the square, and on the other, disrupted the historical–social connections within the surrounding fabric. The outcome of this situation is a conflict between the macro-level goals of urban regeneration and the micro-level needs of historic neighborhoods—a contradiction that, if it persists, may lead to the fragmentation of the historic fabric, erosion of local identity, and the complete replacement of neighborhood life with tourism-oriented functions. In response to the research questions, it can be stated that the outcomes of the Sabzeh Meydan project are both complex and dual in nature. The southern section of the project stands as a successful example of place-based regeneration. Due to its proximity to major urban landmarks such as the historic bazaar and the Jame Mosque, it has redefined the role of the city center in Zanjan's social and cultural life through enhanced accessibility, increased public presence, and a strengthened sense of place.

Conversely, the northern section—where interventions have extended into the neighborhood boundaries—has experienced considerable negative consequences. Disruption of spatial hierarchy, large-scale physical alterations incompatible with the neighborhood structure, demolition or weakening of historic fabrics, loss of small-scale neighborhood centers, influx of non-local users, and reduction in residents' sense of place attachment are among the key outcomes. These changes have not only caused spatial and social fragmentation but also limited public engagement with the newly developed northern areas. This is because, in the perception of residents and citizens, the northern section continues to be recognized as a neighborhood, retaining some of its local characteristics. This has created a duality and tension between the project's modern physical form and its local identity, leading to reduced functional coherence and diminished attractiveness for public presence in this part of the city.

Overall, while the Sabzeh Meydan project has succeeded in strengthening the square's tourism role at the metropolitan scale, it has generated a spatial and functional duality at the local level. This duality has simultaneously enhanced urban vitality and weakened the historic–social fabric of the surrounding neighborhoods. Hence, the Sabzeh Meydan experience can be regarded as a dual model: in areas where principles of place-based development, functional continuity, and spatial proportionality have been observed, the outcomes are positive and sustainable; whereas in areas where these principles were ignored, the interventions have led to physical, functional, and social challenges.

Accordingly, the findings—consistent with the theoretical framework—indicate that the success of development interventions in historic fabrics depends on maintaining scale compatibility, strengthening functional linkages with authentic urban elements, and avoiding large-scale interventions that disrupt social and physical structures. Therefore, for similar future projects, it is recommended that analysis of historical, social, and functional layers precede the design phase, adopting a gradual development approach and reinforcing small-scale local centers as key strategic principles.

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