



# Revitalization Strategies in Iranian Historical City Cores The Case of Shiraz

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## Abstract

The issue of cultural heritage preservation is more challenging in developing countries than in other parts of the world. In societies eager for progress, the modern European cities are regarded as the most desirable reference for a high quality urban environment. Urban settlement transformation in the developing world was very slow before the industrial revolution but old urban fabrics experienced a significant structural transformation with commercial, economical, social and cultural changes.

During the last fifty years, Iran has had numerous experiences in various scales and subjects of urban design in the context of historical city parts, ranging from urban renewal projects to urban regeneration and rehabilitation projects. Most of these have not been actually successful, and unfortunately no lessons have been learned from those failures.

The mutual strategic aim in all projects was to reach out into more interesting communities that inhabit the old urban area; these communities can help the whole city to provide better facilities for more residents. This goal would only be achieved by creating a new balance between conservation and development. Urban design strategies that illustrate these specific principles and methods should be developed.

This paper attempts to identify major approaches to revitalize Iranian historic cores. It focuses on ways to revitalize traditional structures, patterns and values in the process of regeneration of Shiraz; one of the most historical cities in Iran. It starts with a brief discussion on the history of large-scale interventions in Shiraz and its key stages of transformation. Rehabilitation projects of *Sang-e Siah* and *Shah Cheragh*, two major historic neighborhoods in the city center of Shiraz are described and analyzed. The main successful results and policies in these two projects are defined and shortcomings and possible solutions are discussed in the last section.

## 1. Introduction

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The modernization movement in Iran started with Qajar king's travel (Naser-ed-Din Shah) to Europe in the 1870's, but it was during the Reza Shah period (1921-41) that the idea got momentum. The European influences that had been filtering into Iran since the 16th century finally gained ascendancy and the country underwent a phase of intense westernization.

Reza Shah's urban modernization led to changes not only in cultural patterns of urban life and the economic structure of the country, but also in spatial organization. He attempted to modernize major cities by driving a network of long straight roads through the heart of the urban fabric. Construction of urban highways and boulevards intensified the urban circulation system from the 1950's during the Second Pahlavi era as a sign of modernization (H.Bahrainy – 2007). Wide streets with free access to traffic and different parts of the city became an apt place for shops and commercial spaces following the preference of both shopkeepers and consumers. This has caused maintenance and exploitation problems for the old Bazaar structure.

The result was a radical heterogeneity in major historical cities because old city cores had been generated by different social and environmental circumstances and were not capable of accommodating the requirements of a modernized society. Large areas of most old urban centers are becoming desolate wastelands of empty stores and buildings which are hostile to a vital society. Regeneration of these urban areas will help the whole city to function better.

## 2. Shiraz formation and transformation

Shiraz, the sixth largest city in Iran after Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Tabriz and Karaj is the center of Fars province in southern Iran. The city is located 895 km south of Tehran and 100 km north of the Persian Gulf.

### 2.1 Shiraz transformation before *Safavid* period

The earliest reference to the city, as *Tiraziš*, is on *Elamite* clay tablets dated to 2000 BC found in the south western corner of Shiraz city (Cameron 1948). According to some Iranian mythological traditions, it was originally erected by *Tahmuras Diveband*, and afterward fell to ruins (Conder 1827).

Although the foundation of Shiraz was before the Islamic period, the city became the provincial capital only in 693 A.D, after the Arab armies



**Figure 1.** Shiraz; Physical structure of the city in 12th century A.D

conquered *Estakhar*, the nearby Sassanian capital. As *Estakhar* fell into decline, Shiraz grew in importance under the Arabs and several local dynasties.

The *Buyids* (945-1055) made it their capital. Although Shiraz was spared destruction during the *Mongol* invasion, the town was devastated in turn by *Timur* (1387 and 1393), by great floods in 1630 and 1668, by the Afghan invaders in 1724, and by earthquakes which partially destroyed the city in 1789, 1814, 1824 and 1853 (Lockhart 1939; Clarke 1963; Wilber 1975).

## 2.2 Shiraz transformation until 1925

During the *Safavid* period (1502-1722), security and prosperity returned to Iranian cities and was maintained for about two centuries. The Governor-general of Fars put great effort in beautifying Shiraz. He copied Shah *Abbas's* famous *Chahar-Bagh* at Isfahan” (Lockhart 1939; Arberry 1960) and constructed a magnificent palace in the great square.

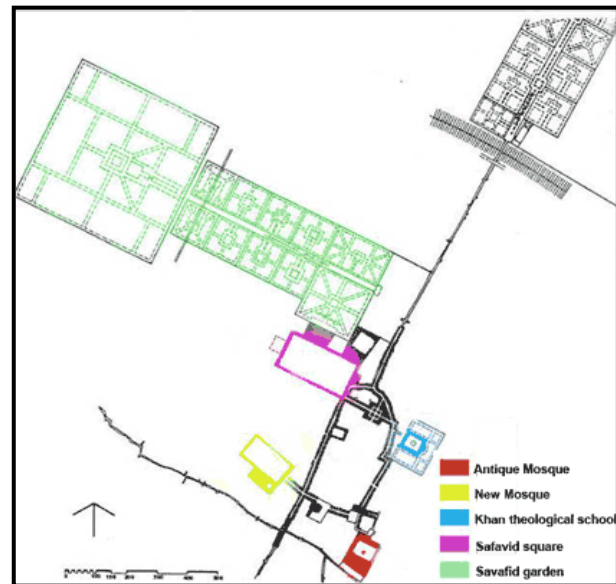
Shiraz was initially circular in shape, however the regular pattern of the city soon changed to an organic structure like other Iranian cities, comprising the main elements of such cities. The form of the city stabilized in the 15th century and its shape from that time until the 20th century exhibited a fair representative of a typical traditional city before modernization (Karimi 1998). Shiraz’s decline started

with the Afghan raids in the early 18th century, several earthquakes, and an internal uprising. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the city again came back to life and splendor "under the benevolent attention of a regent-ruler, *Karim Khan Zand*" (Wilber 1975; Boyle 1978). Twenty-seven constructions in Shiraz, of which sixteen remain today, are attributed to *Karim Khan Zand* (Scarce 1991).

Although the prosperity of Shiraz was seriously interrupted by the decline of the *Zand* dynasty (1794) and Tehran took the place of Shiraz as the Capital from this period, Shiraz remained one of the most important provincial cities during the *Qajar* period.

The map of the city in this period shows that the old district is clearly the most integrated place in the city, which coincides with the geographical centre of the city as well. The city consisted of eleven distinct quarters (*mahallas*), inhabited by separate communities with powerful social cohesion.

## 2.4 Shiraz transformation after 1925



**Figure 2.** Shiraz; Physical structure of the city in 16th century A.D

The metamorphosis of Shiraz into a modern city began with the attempts of Reza Khan (1925-1941), the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979). After the first period of modernization the growth and development of Shiraz became radically different from its traditional pattern. A regular pattern of modern networks was superimposed on the historic core as the common pattern of expansion, and the organic shape of the traditional area has been trapped inside the enclosed and segmented historic core.

Apart from the influences of many political and economic changes since World War II, the intensified forces of modernization and industrialization transformed the city in the late 1960s and the 1970s. The old core turned into a very small part of the sprawling city, suffering from decay and lack of maintenance. Social, political, and economic changes during the post-revolutionary period, particularly during the first two decades after the revolution (1979-1997), also affected the fate of the old core. This was particularly executed through the direct interventions of the state and a constant desire toward unbridled development and modernization despite the apparently traditional nature of the government.



**Figure 3.** Expansion of Shiraz during 1960, the historic core gradually became a minor part of the sprawling city and lost its physical, social, and economic significance.

Source: Shiraz municipality

Master planning in Iran started in the 1960s. Before this era the act of road building was on the agenda in different cities, but these acts did not follow any predetermined plans. The decisions were rather casually prepared depending on the time and location. The need for master plans started to emerge when cities grew enormously, and when the country was introduced to the achievement of Western planning methods. These master plans had three important components: road network, land use, and building density or heights. Through the control of these three elements, the master plans attempted to achieve their initial goals.

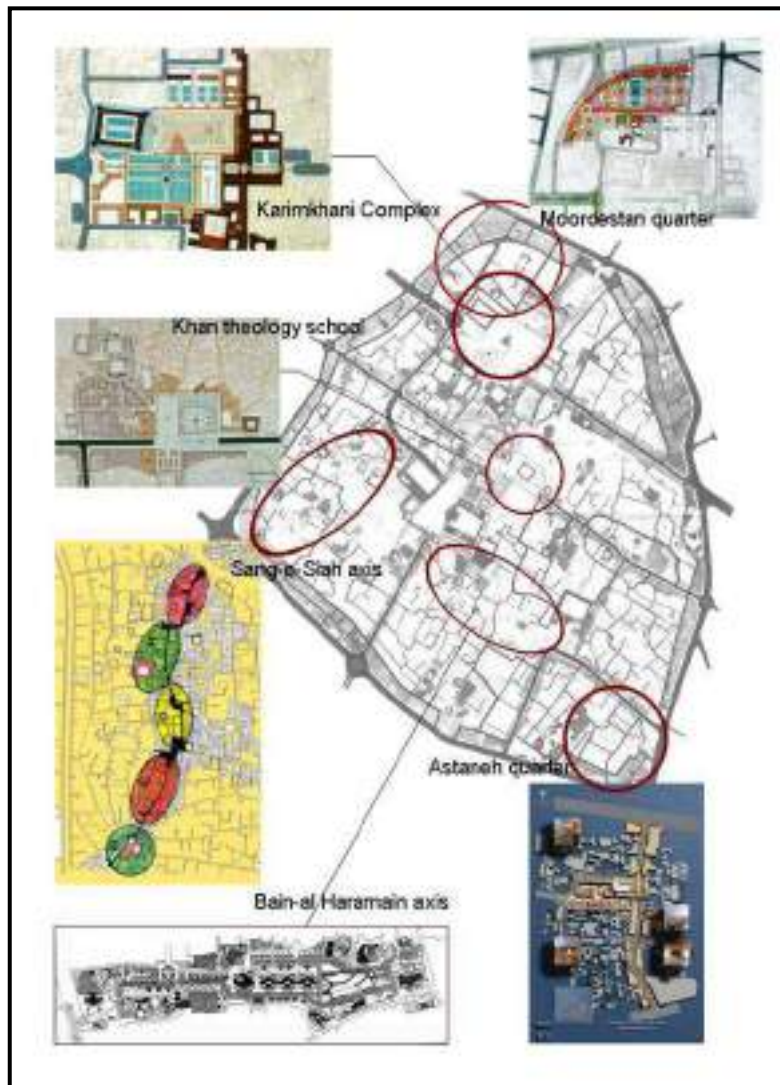
After the first program of road building in Shiraz, the first comprehensive plan was produced by Tehran University, department of architecture in 1966. The plan produced

by these planners was very radical. A rectangular grid of roads designed for cars has been superimposed on the older grid without the slightest regard to the historic evolution and older patterns of growth. The usable land area for different urban factors increased from 22 sq. kilometers in 1962 to around 80 sq. kilometers in 1992.

In reality the comprehensive plan was not fully implemented. Only some of the major streets proposed by this plan were built. New streets created by this plan together with the ones created before were enough to influence the whole integrity of the city. The second master plan was prepared by *Naghshe-Jahan-Pars* Consultants about two decades ago.

The autocratic control of the decision-making, policy formulation, planning and design exercises by the central government and its agencies, together with access to financial resources made the instrument of authority a determining factor in the implementation of large-scale redevelopment oriented programs. All these schemes involved the modernization of the pre-existing urban structure of the historic center by means of cutting wide and straight avenues through its densely built-up quarters. However, since 1997, several political and administrative reforms at national, provincial and local level changed this situation and provided a basis for the emergence of a new series of regeneration and conservation activities in this area.

According to the above discussion, four key periods are identified during which the historic core was under pressure from various waves of renewal and redevelopment including: *Zand* dynasty [1750-94], Modernization under Reza Khan [1920-41], the period of city sprawl in the late 1960s-1970s, and the first two decades after Islamic



**Figure 4.** The Comprehensive Plan for the historic core of Shiraz. (Naqsh-e-Jahan-Pars 1998)

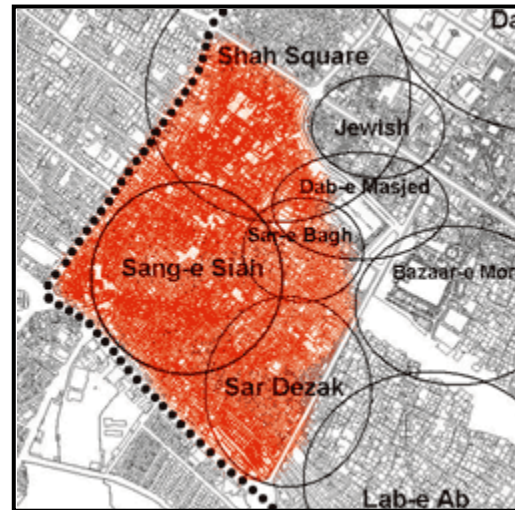
Revolution of 1979, the so-called post-revolutionary period (1979-1997).

### 3. Case studies

During the past decades, the historic city centre has suffered from depopulation, extensive deterioration, several legal impediments and official obstacles, lack of investment, high crime rates, social fragmentation, poverty, deprivation and inefficient urban management. However, since 1997, several political and administrative reforms have changed this situation and provided a basis for the emergence of a new series of regeneration and conservation activities in this area. In this section two major projects that have been designed for the old city of Shiraz are discussed.

#### 3.1 Sang-e Siah project

The study area is located at the heart of an urban block on the west side of the historic core which encompasses the old quarters of *Darb-e Masjed*, *Armenian Sar-e Bagh*; as well as the main parts of Shah Square, *Sar Dezak*, and the Jewish quarters. The names of the neighborhoods are still used as general geographical locations, but the corporate structure of individual quarters no longer exists.



**Figure 5.** The boundary of the urban block, which contains historical quarters

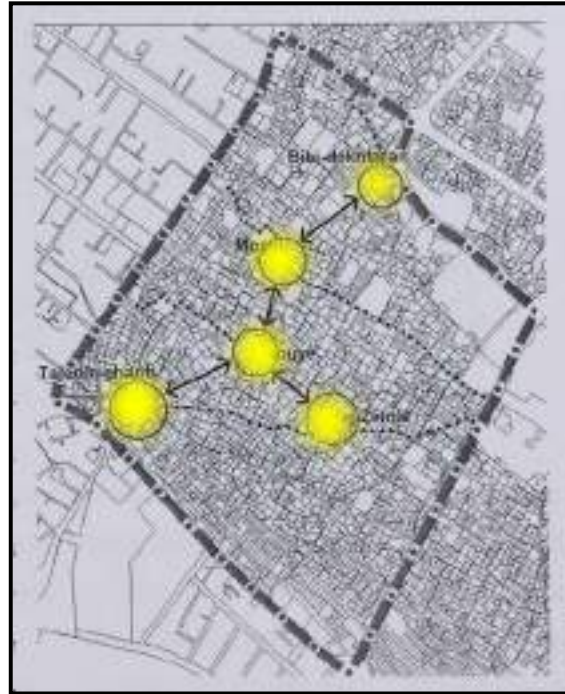
##### 3.1.1 Site analysis

The imposed avenues of the 1920s and 30s disintegrated the social and spatial networks of the old quarters and formed a series of large urban blocks which contain parts of historic quarters. This block covers approximately 70.4 hectares and contains over 2476 residential units, with 15435 inhabitants (18.74 percent of the historic core area) (Naqsh-e-Jahan-Pars 1998; Pardaraz 2003). Residential area is the dominant use (62%). The second most dominant use is access network with 19%. Most commercial uses are located along new streets on the border of the urban block. There are also four local commercial centers, literally *bazarcheh*, in the proximity of the historic neighborhood centers which mainly provide the daily or regular needs of the residents of their immediate neighborhoods. The area contains more than 26 religious centers including mosques, local shrines, and theological schools.

Although the spatial dimension of the area has changed to some extent, it still largely retains its traditional layout. There are fourteen monuments listed by the Cultural Heritage Organization, as well as more than hundred unlisted but architecturally

significant buildings (mainly historic residential houses) that determine the quality of this urban context.

The dominant route for pedestrians is "*Sang-e Siah*" axis, the north to south spine, from *Bibi Dokhtaran* tomb to the *Taj-al Din Gharib* mausoleum near the old *Kazeroun Gate*. Although Shiraz is not a pilgrimage centre like Mashhad, mosques and shrines dominate the skyline of the historic core, and are the most noteworthy features of the urban landscape (Clarke 1963). A close examination of the area shows that the major monuments are in close proximity to each other and form five distinctive clusters. They are located along *Sang-e Siah* axis, the main spine of the area.



**Figure 6.** The monuments clustering along the *Sang-e Siah* axis define a heritage corridor which plays a vital role in this area.

### 3.1.2 Design analysis

The origin of the *Sang-e Siah* Project lies in 1999 when the Council for Historic District approved a proposal presented by the local representative to share the implementing responsibilities of a regeneration program for the eastern part of the historic core, called *Sang-e Siah* (Izadi 2008). From the beginning, the basis of the project was to be a partnership among the different agencies involved each with responsibility for conservation and regeneration at their respective levels. The *Sang-e Siah* regeneration project has been planned and designed in order to reverse the dramatic conditions in the area.

The manifesto prepared by the Council for Historic District justified protection of the historic environment. It was a guidance note which emphasized the importance of the historic area and its elements. The manifesto (called *maram-nameh*) marked a major step forward in official attitudes towards the historic environment. This manifesto reflected anxiety about the increasingly rapid loss of parts of the historic environment. Nevertheless, it authorized small scale development of ruined buildings and vacant lands into required functions and services for the neighborhoods (Izadi 2008).

At the preliminary stage of the program, the main focus was on restoration of individual buildings and public open space. However, regarding the critical situation of the area, it needed to be complemented and supported by other modes of interventions, such as adaptive re-use, careful urban renewal and even substitution of elements which were no longer viable or needed to be replaced by the new functions.

Historic houses and monuments have been rehabilitated in an effort to revitalize the existing architectural heritage and make them accessible to the local community as well as visitors. The adaptive re-use of restored buildings is considered from the beginning in order to keep the building alive, provide meaning to the physical intervention, make local communities 'own' the building and generate income for future operation and maintenance (UDRO 2001). The program is specifically aimed at attracting investment in the historic urban centers by promoting the re-use of key buildings as a means of encouraging sustainable regeneration of these neighborhoods.

There was an emphasis on a gradual process of physical rehabilitation and economic improvement. The new policy declared that facilitating the gradual rehabilitation of existing residential units through the creation of necessary conditions including the improvement of infrastructures, development of required services and functions, and upgrading of public open spaces.

As can be seen from figure 7, there are five zones identified by the strategic plan including pilgrim and tourist zone (*Bibi-dokhtaran*), local commercial and service zones (*Moshir* and *Haj-zeinal*), cultural zone (*Sibuyeh*) and commercial zone (*Kazeroon Gate*). These five prioritized zones were introduced by the strategic plan, each forming a focus for rehabilitation, upgrading and conservation.

**Figure 7.** Five zones identified by the strategic plan including pilgrim and tourist zone (*Bibi-dokhtaran*), local commercial and service zones (*Moshir* and *Haj-zeinal*), cultural zone (*Sibuyeh*), and commercial zone (*Kazeroon Gate*). These five prioritized zones were introduced by the strategic plan, each forming a focus for rehabilitation, upgrading and conservation.



With recent social and cultural changes, historic buildings have been subject to extensive changes, alteration and in some cases a considerable amount of damage. The historic houses which were in danger of destruction has been rehabilitated, upgraded and converted in to a local library and cultural centre. These structures are seen not only as monuments and historic building to be preserved, but also as potential focal points that can attract tourists and stimulate the inhabitants to continue or start new activities. In this project, the infrastructure improved, the main access resurfaced, and building facades

were rehabilitated with the traditional patterns particularly those which are located around the newly constructed plaza.

### 3.2 Shah Cheragh Project

The second case study is located at a very central part of the historic core which encompasses the old quarters of *Bazaar-e Morgh*, *Balakaft*; as well as some parts of *Darb-e Masjed*, *Eshagh Beig*, and the Jewish quarters. This area is significant for the important monuments that it houses such as *Shah-e-Cheragh*, New Mosque (*Masjed-e-No*), *Hakim* theological school, Antique Mosque (*Masjed-e-Atigh*), and *Seyed Alaeddin Hossein* shrine.

#### 3.2.1 Site analysis

The project area covers approximately 61.2 hectares and contains over 1000 residential unit, with 6000 inhabitants (7.23 percent of the historic core area) (Naghsh-e-Jahan-Pars 1998; Pardaraz 2003). Residential is the dominant use (31.1%). Apart from access network, shrines and religious activities are the second most dominant use with 14.8% in total. There are also short parts of the local bazaar which mainly provide regular needs of pilgrims.

In 1995, imitating Tehran municipality in its *Navab* project, the mayor of Shiraz introduced a comprehensive redevelopment scheme joining two religious complexes, *Seyed Alaeddin Hossein* and *Shah-e Cheragh* called *Bein-al-Haramain*. Between 1995 and 1996, Shiraz municipality demolished 4.95 hectares of the historic core to create a new axis between those two religious centers. Much of the urban fabric was demolished without any consideration for the local culture and architectural heritage in this area. The guiding principle was the construction of a broad, straight street (450 meter long and 110 meter wide) which would allow the circulation of traffic right through the historic urban fabric. It was an ambitious plan which not only failed to provide income for the municipality, but also wasted the resources of the municipality.



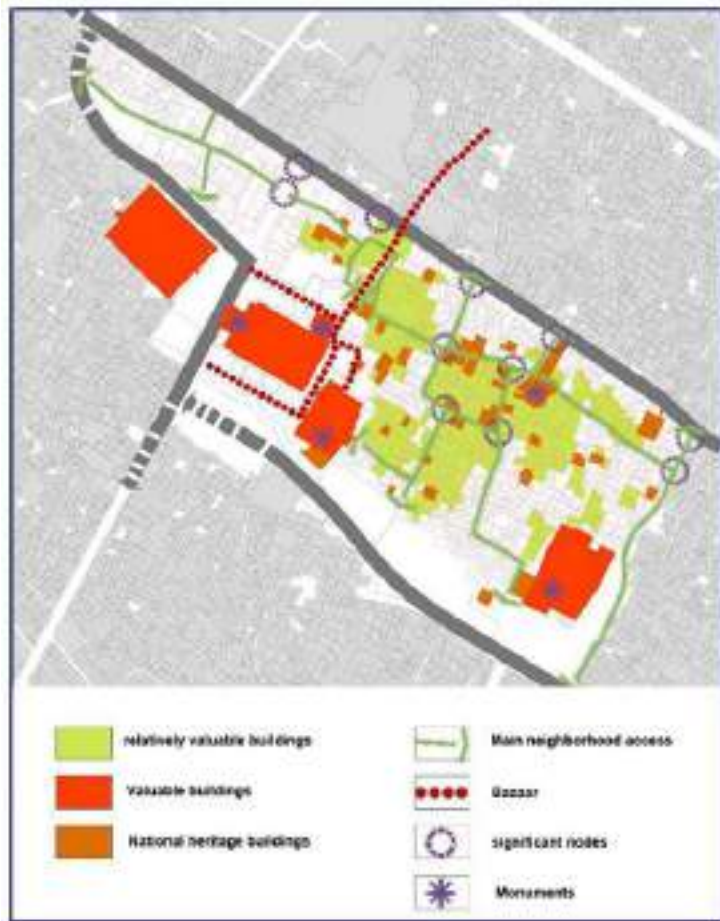
**Figure 8.** Comprehensive redevelopment scheme of *Bein-al Haramain*, Shiraz, 1995- 96  
 Source: Iran Surveying Organization (left photo), 1996, Pardaraz Consultant, 2003 (right map)

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comprehensive redevelopment scheme for *Bein-al Haramain* was not an isolated case which was superimposed on the historic urban fabric during this period. The pressure on the *Shah-e Cheragh* Shrine and *Sayyed Alaeddin* complex generated by a mass pilgrimage, which require facilities and new spaces, persuaded their administrators to seek an extension scheme in order to provide wider open spaces around the shrines, the enlargement of old structure and preparing modern facilities.

The financial abilities of these institutions, which were supported by the religious authority particularly after the revolution, enabled these agencies to manage large scale redevelopment projects. The integration of the shrine with associated functions and surrounding buildings was the prime objective of these redevelopment schemes. However, in practice, the main factors of change were the increasing demand for vehicular access and improving circulation, combined with large scale commercial development. These redevelopment schemes transformed the vast area of the historic urban fabric around these pilgrimage centers.

Although the spatial structure of the area has changed to some extent, it still contains valuable monuments and spaces. There are more than 30 monuments listed by the Cultural Heritage Organization, as well as more unlisted but architecturally significant buildings. Although the area of these historic buildings is less than 8% of the whole area, the traditional design of the district is distinctive.



**Figure 9.** The existing fabric and its valuable and historical buildings in the area  
 Source: Bavand consultant report, 2010

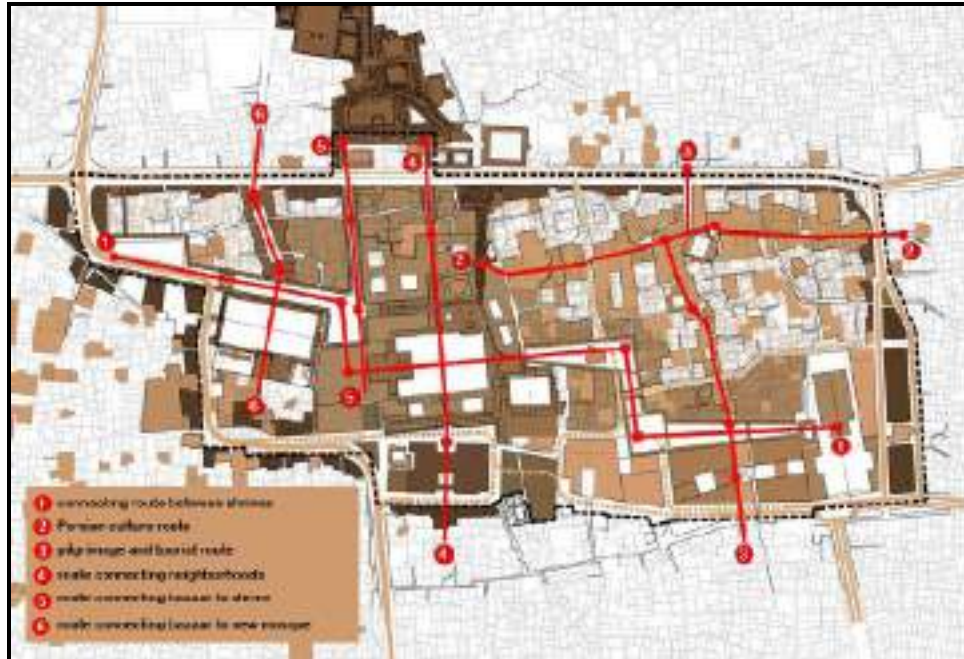
### 3.2.2 Design analysis

Revitalization and development project of *Shah-e Cheragh* was designed to compensate the insufficiencies and shortages of religious buildings and their pilgrims and also residents and employees of the area.

The main aims of intervention in this district as mentioned in the report are: the major aim of intervention in this district as mentioned in the report is spatial restructuring of *Shah-e Cheragh* complex with respect to history and religious spaces and monuments in order to equip it into the top tourist pilgrimage destination in the country and region. To achieve this, providing sufficient space for future development of shrines and religious monuments is essential. A central and significant position for the shrine has been defined, the peripheral range around them organized and improved and tourist facilities for hundreds of thousands of annual pilgrims to the shrine has been provided. Solving traffic problems of pedestrian and vehicle traffic and creating proper space for inhabitants and pilgrims to move, stop and rest along transport networks is the other aim of this project.

In order to achieve mentioned aims, some strategies were declared. Green and public transport has been prioritized. Courtyards around shrines and their connection to pedestrian routes were organized. Multi land use spaces along these pedestrian routes were located and appropriate urban furniture in proposed areas were designed for rest and recreation. District development was restructured with participation of private and public investors according to valuable patterns based on sustainable development and urban environment quality.

By considering other functional areas for residents and also the fact that the designed area is a combination of various old neighborhoods which has been separated by later built street, six major routes have been designed to define the main structure of the area. These routes link shrines, pilgrimage facilities, and cultural activities and make corridors for visitors and residents full of experiences and life. They also lead tourist from other neighborhoods and bazaar towards the shrines and cultural centers in the area (figure 17).



**Figure 10.** The final urban design of the area focuses on six main axes which connect a number of monuments and buildings and link the area to the rest of the old city (Source: *Bavand* consultant report, 2010).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The preceding section has identified the features of two different projects in Shiraz city center and explored the driving forces behind them. Although both projects have been driven by a desire to revitalize the historic core and the concerns for the quality of the urban environment, each has followed a different approach, policy and strategy in addressing the issues.

Large-scale interventions in the historic urban fabric have always been associated with the autocratic powers, whether central or local, secular or religious, and traditionalist or modernist. In these projects, a new revitalization program has been formulated based on the lessons learned from previous experiences, which were mostly run by the central government.

There was a shift in attitude and the development of initiatives, in which the local authorities were encouraged to form partnerships and compete for regeneration funds. *Shah Cheragh* project has not been implemented yet but the project for revitalization of *Sang-e Siah* quarter is a prime example of this new approach. Some successful strategies and approaches are as below:

1. Small scale redevelopment of ruined buildings into a centre of local retail units has proved to be the catalyst for the general revival of the area.

2. The new role of the central government influenced by the decentralization policy which the state redistributed the authority, responsibility and financial resources at provincial and local level
3. The strategic and efficient role of the local leadership in building networks of communication and trust among the different actors
4. Careful replacement of new buildings on vacant or broken-down land used to enhance the prestige and importance of monuments and historic buildings Sang- e Siah project is notable for reinforcing and stimulating a gradual process of the historic environment revitalization.

Intervention strategy of this program gave priority to facilitate the gradual rehabilitation of existing residential units, avoiding large scale intervention and focusing on structure and infrastructure of the area. Although the implementing phases of *Shah Cheragh* project are already underway, a gradual strategic plan is neglected, maybe because of the autocratic religious power with enough resources and money. This will cause a comprehensive development in shrine complexes, which may damage the residential area. Concentrating on infrastructure and public space improvement and focusing on cultural activities can be seen as the engine of rehabilitation.

Description and analysis of these two projects introduce some useful approaches towards livable Iranian historical city cores. Despite a number of creative strategies utilized by the local authorities, economic deprivation of inhabitants in the historic core and high rate of mobility of residents prevent public participation in these areas. With description and analysis of more interventions in Iranian historical urban areas, strategies in historical city cores should be introduced and evaluated. Singular successful patterns and strategies should be brought together to build up a framework of strategies of urban design in context of historical Iranian city cores.

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