The urban transformation in a precarious housing area: Comparative analysis between Baku (Azerbaijan) and Tehran (Iran)

ALIYEV, Tural, HASHEMI BEHRAMANI, Alireza

Abstract

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ALIYEV, Tural, HASHEMI BEHRAMANI, Alireza. The urban transformation in a precarious housing area: Comparative analysis between Baku (Azerbaijan) and Tehran (Iran). Urbanizm, 2018, no. 23, p. 1-11

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:112084

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Frequency and Format:
The International Scientific Journal on Urban Planning and Sustainable Development will be published in one issue per year. All issues will be supplied to subscribers in PDF and paper format (ISSN: 1811-6582).

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The International Scientific Journal on Urban Planning and Sustainable Development is a refereed journal. In order to be acceptable for publication, submissions must describe key advances made in one or more of the topics listed on:

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THE URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN A PRECARIOUS HOUSING AREA: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN BAKU (AZERBAIJAN) AND TEHRAN (IRAN)

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ABSTRACT

Urban transformation has become an increasingly important tool in cities for achieving a range of goals. Among many other cities, Baku and Tehran have been subject to urban transformation practices. Despite the differences (scale, size of population, geographic particularities etc.), these cities have experienced a similar urban development model: initially being part of the Eastern world, they subsequently integrated, in different ways, the approaches applied to Western cities. Urban transformation is generally focused on facilitating the city network(s), the need for housing for the population and providing circulation. These aspects are guiding the city’s development at first. The presented article is also focused on a transformation of the precarious area of the city in relation to the housing and transportation. Based on two urban transformation projects – “Winter Park” (Qış Parkı) in Baku and the “Navvab Highway” in Tehran – the aim of the study is to analyze the logic of urban development, explore the reasons behind the transformation and see what defines the logic of such transformation in Baku and Tehran, which will lead to better understanding of such possible urban transformations in the future.

Key-words: urban transformation, precarious housing, logic of intervention, comparative project analysis, Baku and Tehran.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, urban transformation has become an important practice regarding city development. Baku – the capital of Azerbaijan – and Tehran – the capital of Iran – have had a long and rich urban development history, with their recently experiencing major renewal in their city centers. Moreover, both these cities in neighboring countries, initially being part of the Eastern world, have been party to the influence of Western cities in terms of their city development model and urban transformation. Obviously, their scale regarding the size of the population, magnitude of the administrative boundaries, geographical topography as well as their historical importance as the capital are all different. Accordingly, we are interested in analyzing the particularities of city development in terms of what defines the logic of transformation nowadays, which is anticipated will lead to understanding the possible further urban transformations in the future in these two cities. In sum, the study is aimed at eliciting the reasons behind earlier transformation of the two focal cities and also explaining how they have implemented the practices used in Western cities.

First, we consider briefly the history of urban development on a large scale (city scale) to understand its urban transition. Next, we select a small scale (neighborhood scale) urban transformation project to identify the logic of transformation. The need for housing for the population and the importance of providing the circulation – primarily defines the city’s development. That is, urban transformation involves focusing on precarious areas of the city in relation to these two aspects. Accordingly, this article analyzes the urban transformation in a precarious housing area of the city. In Baku, the focus is on the “Winter Park” (Qış Parkı) project, involving the transformation of an historically inhabited locality in Baku’s Yasamal district into the largest public space in the urban area (after the Baku Boulevard on the
Seafront). In Tehran, we have chosen the “Navvab Highway” (Shahid Navab Safavi Expressway) project, which pertains to the transformation of old houses into medium and high-rise buildings, followed by the construction of a new highway, in Tehran’s 10th district. The presented projects are appropriate large scale relevant case studies for analyzing the logic of urban transformation in the two focal cities.

2. DEFINITION OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION

Urban transformation is commonly used by the cities as a tool for the renovation of decaying areas within their boundaries. Regarding which, Dalia Lichfield [8] defines it as the reconciliation of the need for better understanding of the processes of urban decay and the results obtained in this reconciliation process. Urban transformation can also be seen as a method of resolving problems found in urban blight, in a coordinated manner [4]. That is, it refers to a comprehensive integrated vision and action, aimed at ensuring the continuous improvement of an area’s economic, physical, social and environmental conditions [10]. From these definitions, we can understand that the urban transformation is used by the city authorities within the context of tackling the urban decay process, the improvement of poor living conditions in terms of public health, addressing the physical and social infrastructure as well as resolving problems in a continuous coordinated manner. The parts of a city urban transformation are primarily focused upon, are generally unaffordable (high housing costs relative to income), unsuitable (overcrowded poor dwelling conditions, unsafe and/or poorly located) and insecure (insecure tenure type and subject to forced moves) districts. These three elements (unaffordability, unsuitability and insecurity) illustrate how we should identify “precarious housing” [6].

3. COMPARATIVE HISTORIES OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

At the beginning of the 18th century, from the structural point of view, in the old European cities, the transformation of the means of production and transport, as well as the emergence of new urban functions, contributed to the destruction of the old frames of the medieval city, with these being replaced by new modern forms [3]. The City of London (1,873,676 inhabitants, 1841) and Paris (1,696,141 inhabitants, 1861) were the first on with rationalized communication routes and other types of infrastructure, including railway stations, department stores, hotels, cafes and apartment buildings (idem). Subsequently, industries were set up in the suburbs, to which the middle and working classes flocked. At that time, the cities of Baku and Tehran were small urban areas. The former was a small port city (13,000 inhabitants, 1860) on the Caspian Sea, connected to the Silk Road, whilst the city of Tehran (174,256 inhabitants, 1867) was situated to the north of the historical city of Rey, also near to the Silk Road. The common history of both cities in terms of their urban development came to an end after the Russo–Persian wars (1813; 1828), when Baku was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Later on in the 19th century, Baku became one of the first oil cities in the world, creating its city image with residential and industrial areas, through the exploitation of its natural resources.

![Fig. 1. Baku : key dates in urban history and demographic evolution, Source: Aliyev T. & Hashemi A., 2018](image-url)
Figure 1 and 2 shows the historical urban dynamics and the demographic growth in both cities. As can be seen, Baku and Tehran experienced significant population growth between 1750 and 1930. Whilst Baku had stable evolution from 1930 to 2000, Tehran’s continued to increase rapidly until 1960 and since then, it has been quite uniform. Regarding Baku, in recent times, after a short dip in population at the end of the last millennium, there was exponential growth, which has continued until this day. Notably, the population of Baku (2.3 million) today is three times less than that of Tehran (8.8 million), whereas the administrative area of the former (2,130 km²) is three times bigger than Tehran’s (686 km²). Simple division of these figures reveals that the city of Tehran’s (12,896 hab./km²) population density is more than 10 times that of Baku (960 hab./km²).

Baku, having been an oriental medieval city, started to integrate European approaches into its urban planning. The city was developed around the old city with new French Baroque architecture and Haussmann’s 19th century architectural style buildings. With the creation of large French-style buildings, Baku became known as “the Paris of the Caucasus” [5]. The new French-style districts were incorporated in the first official master plan of the city, developed by German civil engineer Nikolaus Von der None in 1898. During this period, the city grew into one of the major industrial centers of the Russian Empire, becoming for the first time in its history the capital of an independent state, the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, after the collapse of the Russian Empire (1918–1920). During the period of the Soviet Union (1920–1991), the city’s architecture was dominated by the Soviet-style, before it became the capital of the Independent Republic of Azerbaijan (from 1991), which signaled a departure from this genre.

Nowadays, the city of Baku officially has 2.3 million inhabitants¹. It has enlarged its urban landscape with new postmodern buildings, new city districts, large scale renovations and retrofitting projects. The modern urban development of the city can be divided into two historical and different modes of urban development [1]:

1. From 1991 to 2005: The development of the city can be defined as chaotic, with public and green spaces disappearing, and a pressing need for housing resulted in rapid construction of buildings;
2. From 2005 to 2018: The development of the city can be defined as being more controlled, with the restoration of public and green spaces, the renovation of the city center, retrofitting of the industrial “Black City” area as well as the appearance of skyscrapers, all of which having contributed to a positive (modern) image of the city.

In the case of Tehran, the city came to prominence in 1786, when it became the capital of the Empire of Iran. Initially, it had been developed in accordance with the traditional Iranian architectural model. However, during the dynasty of Qajar (1786–1925), the architects of Tehran, given their good ties with European countries, decided to adopt the urban development model of France. That is, the first urban development and master plan of Tehran was influenced by Haussmann’s renovation of Paris [7].

¹ Unofficially, it is estimated that up to 3.5–4 million people live, or commute, to the city every day (Valiyev, 2012.).
However, the vision of urban development in Tehran changed after the coming to power of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), when the American model exerted a profound influence. In 1968, for the first time ever, the municipality started the development of a Master Plan involving coordination
between the Iranian and American societies\(^2\) \[9\]. This was primarily focused on a highway transportation system and on zone planning similar to the arrangements in Los Angeles (idem). However, the plan was abandoned after the Islamic Revolution and the introduction of revolutionary thought in society, which rejected anything seen as a product of American cities. Nevertheless, the basis of the master plan was implemented in terms of the structure of the highway transportation system and nowadays, Tehran is continuing its development according to the same principles.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE “WINTER PARK” URBAN TRANSFORMATION PROJECT IN BAKU

In the context of political and economic system change (from 1991), the city of Baku was not able to implement its Master Plan successfully, which resulted in chaotic development of the city. This happened because of internal demographic growth accompanied by the arrival of refugees and IDPs to the Baku region fleeing the Nagorno-Karabakh territorial conflict. The rising need for housing and the rapid development were accompanied by the disappearance of the public and green spaces in the city center. From 2005 onwards, the authorities started to think about how to avoid this negative trend and decided to introduce more controlled development, which would involve the restoration and creation of new public and green spaces, renovation of the city center etc. The developments at “Winter Park” became part of this strategy. The project area of 10.5 ha (105,000 m\(^2\)), including seven hectares of public space with an approximate width of 160 meters in the city center, was not chosen randomly. The transformation of the precarious housing area was already integrated into the last Master Plan of the city in 1986, which indicates that “Winter Park” was planned to be built at that time.

![Example of precarious housing in Baku](http://detrip.ru)

**Fig. 5.** Example of precarious housing in Baku

However, in the context of political and economic system change, the Master Plan was not implemented carefully. Approximately two decades after of chaotic development, the authorities are started to develop the city in accordance with the last Master Plan Approval for the project was granted in 2009 and it was completed in 2013. **Fig. 6.**

![“Winter Park” Project Evolution, Source: Aliyev T., & Hashemi A., 2018](http://detrip.ru)

**Fig. 6.** “Winter Park” Project Evolution, Source: Aliyev T., & Hashemi A., 2018

The “Winter Park”, being the largest park in the city center, represents a strategic hub, which is at the heart of the city network, connecting the public spaces. Specifically, the main idea behind this development was the connection of public spaces and the facilitation of the flow from the East to the West part of the city, in parallel with the Baku’s Seaside Boulevard.

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\(^2\) A. Farmanfarmian (from Iran) and V. Gruen (from USA)
The project was inspired by traditional European style planning, where pedestrian flow was given priority over the promotion of a network for cars (Figure 8). The next step of the project is the transformation of another precarious part of the city, “Sovietsky”, on the Western part of the “Winter Park”, thus illustrating continuity in the planning procedure.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE “NAVVAB HIGHWAY” URBAN TRANSFORMATION PROJECT IN TEHRAN

After the Islamic revolution, followed by the Iran-Iraq War, the city of Tehran was confronted by huge urban sprawl. Because of the war and loss of jobs in the regions, migrants moved to Tehran from other cities, which vastly expanded the urban settlement. The municipality did not pay attention to managing the evolution of the city, largely because of the absence of financial resources, which was a basic responsibility of the city authority. In 1987, the new mayor of Tehran (G. Karbaschi), who came from “Construction Government”\(^3\), launched a new and ambitious project in the city. As the last Master Plan, focused on the highway transportation system and on zone planning, municipality developed now project that was promoting the “Highway of Chamran” in the direction of South Tehran. The objective of the highway was to create a new North-South axis of transit, which would also in the future link the city to the new International Airport of Tehran\(^4\). As the portal to the city from the planned airport, the

\(^{3}\) “Construction Government” – type of government that invests primarily in construction, rather than other spheres.

\(^{4}\) Imam Khomeini Airport (IKA)
“Navvab Highway” would portray a positive image of a modern capital. As shown in Figure 9 and mentioned above, the project was inspired by the American model of urban development, which focuses on highway transportation and can be seen in other cities, such as Los Angeles and Dubai etc.

![American Highway model in different countries](http://kusarevelayat.parsiblog.com)

Dubai: Zayed, Start: 1971

Los Angeles: La Sienega, Start: 1937

Source: http://www.buro247.me

Source: Al_ka

Fig. 9. American Highway model in different countries, Source: Aliyev T., & Hashemi A., 2018

However, after being initiated in 1968, the ambitious project remained uncompleted owing to the budget deficit brought about through the extensive war period. The major problem before this transformation was to buy the land and apartments of the population already living along the highway (Karbaschi, interview by Hashemi, 2017).

![“Navvab Highway” – before and after the transformation](http://kusarevelayat.parsiblog.com)

Source: Aminzadeh, Bahraini, 2007

Source: Isna.ir (97032812917)

Fig. 10. “Navvab Highway” – before and after the transformation

When seeking an appropriate solution, the municipality decided to construct the project at the core - in close proximity to the city center (Fig. 10). To avoid financial problems, it called for the construction of the new apartment buildings along the highway, which could be sold to cover the construction cost of the project. In 1990, after a long period (Fig. 11) and following the first Master Plan of the city, the municipality adopted it and launched the complex project. It was anticipated that it would improve the circulation and provide high-density residential, commercial and office buildings. The total area of demolished residential units was set at 47.96 ha (479,600 m²) and the length of the strip was 5,529 m. (Aminzadeh and Bahraini, 2007).

![“Navvab Highway” Project Evolution](http://kusarevelayat.parsiblog.com)

Fig. 11. “Navvab Highway” Project Evolution, Source: Aliyev T., & Hashemi A., 2018

A large-scale project is invariably faced by strong opposition. Different groups were against the project before its launch and subsequent to this, other groups emerged against it. Also, the city of Tehran by developing this complex urban project on such a large scale involved a multitude actors and different
groups as well as individuals. The organizational structure and management mechanisms of the project show the conflict between the actors during the different periods of the construction. (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Challenges of the project before start-up and after inauguration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start up</th>
<th>Reason against</th>
<th>Inauguration</th>
<th>Reason against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People living in the project area</td>
<td>The price of land proposed by the municipality was not enough.</td>
<td>Metro company</td>
<td>Instead of investment in the highway, the project should have involved investing in public transportation, like the metro.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City planners</td>
<td>Municipalities should develop the project in line with it being a memorial to the population.</td>
<td>City planners</td>
<td>The project didn’t sit well and connect in the urban context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private investors</td>
<td>The noise and air pollution coming from the highway. The shopping areas were not sufficiently attractive to entice customers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSES

In general, the “Winter Park” and “Navvab Highway” projects had the same objectives. Their main aims were to improve the transportation network of their respective cities (promote car traffic) by transforming precarious (unaffordable, unsuitable, insecure…) housing parts of the city. The urban projects should also have contributed to the development of several functions (habitation, commerce, office etc.) along the highway. Moreover, the decision in both cases came from the top-down, with little or no participation of the population in the decision-making process. In fact, in both countries, decision-making and implementation of projects are made at a high-level and imposed upon society as goodwill gestures geared towards improving the quality of the citizens’ lives (Aminzadeh and Bahraini, 2007). However, in the end, the outcomes have been quite different to what was proposed. The form and functionality of the projects show clearly that the urbanist’s role was minimized to only putting the project in its location, without there being any planning towards integrating what was proposed into the surrounding urban context. As a consequence, instead of making the place more permeable and integrated, the projects have split the neighborhood into two parts and rather than making the place more walkable as well as facilitating the use of soft transport, they have promoted car circulation. Moreover, the new buildings’ role with the modern facades is to cover the distressed urban area located at the rear: the projects are primarily focused on esthetic issues rather making the place more functional by promoting the sustainability and social mixity. As Figure 13 shows, four different zones can be identified in the “Navvab Highway” project.

![Fig. 13. Schematization of the Navvab Highway’s Zones, Source: Aliyev T., & Hashemi A., 2018](image)

1. The First Zone (A): Located at the rear of the project, this area has more residences than offices. The population of the zone has attachment to the neighborhood, thus preserving its identity.
2. The Second Zone (B): This other rear zone is located near to the city center and for this reason, it has more offices within it.
3. The Third Zone (C): New buildings, which have been welcomed by a new population, which stimulated gentrification of the neighborhood. The population doesn’t have the same socioeconomic conditions as those living in Zones A and B.

4. The Fourth Zone (D): People use the highway with cars passing through the neighborhood, which creates ecological problems in the form of air pollution and excessive noise for the population living there.

In Baku’s “Winter Park” case, as shown in Figure 14, the car circulation is mixed with the public space that is located in the middle of the developed area. The public space makes the integration of the project into its urban context easier, which is not the case with the “Navvab Highway” project. For this reason, one additional zone can be identified in “Winter Park” when compared to the latter project.

5. The Fifth Zone (E):
   - Despite the attractive design, the project presents a weak relationship with the neighborhood and has not promoted “social mixity”. The usage of the area by the population of the neighborhood has not met the expectation of public space, for instead of this being an easily accessible integrated place, it is partially divided by car traffic. The population from the different neighborhoods is connected to the area for leisure primarily through the use of private cars. Hence, the place represents a network for cars with underground parking places, rather than being for pedestrians.
   - “Winter Park” is covered almost completely by granite slabs and the buildings on each side of the street are tiled, which gives the impression of an artificial place.
   - During the winter period, it is almost impossible to walk through the area because of the cold wind.

The presented analysis of the different zones shows the critical points of “Winter Park” and the “Navvab Highway”. In addition, both projects have encouraged a gentrification process in the neighborhoods, with integration being generally ignored and accordingly, they can be defined as “not deeply assimilated” to their urban context. Moreover, “Winter Park” can be defined as a “public space”, rather than a “park”, for despite the 5,000 m² of green space and five fountains, the main elements of the park concept “natural and integrated place for leisure, more walkable, promoting the biodiversity, the accessibility by soft transport and easy-accessible”, have, for the most part, not been achieved. The different forms of car circulation divide the neighborhood into three parts, which is an obstacle to the fluidity of the walking population (Figure 15). Hence, the public space has become an isolated place, which needs more walkable access to the inhabited area around it. In the case of the “Navvab Highway”, this has divided the neighborhood into two (Figure 15), with the circulation of the cars only pertaining to passing through it. Also, as abovementioned, it has led to ecological problems, such as air pollution and excessive noise for the population that lives there.
From the analysis, it would appear that both cities have tried to integrate the best practices from European and American cities in order to modernize the urban areas. Their logic and intention can be considered as being “positive”, whereas the actions taken were not appropriate and outdated, for these have not been consistent with the “sustainable urban transformation” concept, which refers to avoiding spatial, social and environmental fragmentation. It is also about promoting biodiversity, social cohesion and mixity, thus avoiding gentrification. Moreover, it pertains to balancing in terms of maintaining the identity (architectural, traditional, cultural…), thereby protecting the collective memory of the place, whilst at the same time modernizing the area in question. The authorities of Baku and Tehran should address the negative experiences of other cities, as well as their own, in order to deliver successful and sustainable urban projects in the future.

7. CONCLUSION

Urban transformation became an important practice of city development in Baku and Tehran. Despite their differences, both cities initially being part of the Eastern world, were subsequently influenced by Western cities in terms of the urban transformation models, but in different ways. Through analyzing the transformation of precarious housing areas in the city centers of Baku (Winter Park) and Tehran (Navvab Highway), the aim of this article has been to underline the particularity of each transformation. Baku and Tehran both tried to integrate the best practices from European and American cities to modernize the focal urban areas. However, the authorities in each did not properly understand the concept of sustainable urban transformation and do not learn from negative experiences elsewhere, thus failing to deliver effective project outcomes. As explained above, the logic and intention of those in charge of the development can be defined as being positive, whereas what was implemented was inappropriate and outdated. In contrast, many European and American cities today have broken with the past and are pursuing sustainable ways of urban transformation.

The presented wide scale and relevant projects in each city has involved revealing the logic of urban transformation. Baku’s “Winter Park” example shows that, the city authorities tried to integrate the sustainable urban transformation elements (making a public space - a place for leisure in the city center) with some aspects of improvement (integrating the project into the neighborhood, avoiding artificial materials, thinking not just about esthetic aspects, but also about functionality, social and environmental conditions, easy-accessibility as well as promoting soft transport and biodiversity). In Tehran’s “Navvab Highway” case, we have identified the strategy of “complete destruction of the neighborhood” and “complete modernizing of the area”, rather than there having been a more mixed and sustainable urban project. Moreover, sustainable urban transformation is also about public participation in urban projects in cities. However, in both projects, strategic decision-making was made at a high level, whilst citizens’ access to information and the decision-making process were extremely limited. Among the abovementioned elements, the citizen’s support and participation presented a key element for the successful and sustainable urban projects. In sum, the authorities in Baku and Tehran should take heed...
of the negative experiences of other cities as well as their own so as to be able to deliver successful and sustainable urban projects in the future.

REFERENCES
