Urban changes and its impact on the tangible and intangible heritage of City’s Centre: Najaf City as a Case Study

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Abstract. This paper focusing on the recent transformations that happened on the urban landscape of the traditional city centres which threatens the local identity of these centres. Thus, the aim of the research is to clarify the impact of the transformations on the urban landscape in order to benefit from transformations to recreate a traditional future sight for the historical centre of Najaf city. The research concluded that the absence of the modular unit that connecting the composition of the urban landscape, in addition to the absence of the urban regeneration concept in the whole context, led to decay and threatens the historical value of the traditional city centres. The paper recommended that the supporting of the tangible and intangible heritage is a necessity to preserving the traditional value of the city centre. Moreover, creating new activities that considering the urban transformations, should be done within social sustainable planning, and activating the environmental and economic aspects in built environment.

Keywords: Najaf, Transformation, Urban landscape, Traditional city centre, Identity.

1. Introduction
The city of Najaf after 2003 has been suffered a huge cultural, social and economic transformations, which involve the whole of the city, however there were clear affecting the traditional urban landscape of the city [1]. Those transformations have been negatively affected the identity of the city as a traditional Islamic city which has long history [2]. The traditional centre of the Najaf city which is located surrounding the Imam Ali shrine representing a distinctive example of the compact urban fabric [3]. The centre of the city has including many urban activities such as cultural centre, pilgrims’ accommodation, and heritage sites, in addition to housing for local people [4].

Transformation is a change of state: a change from one thing to another, “a passing or passage from one condition, action, or rarely place, to another”; change, “the passage from an earlier to a later stage of development or formation; a style of intermediate or mixed character” [5]. In his book, Architecture
& Identity (1997), Chris Abel asserts that transformations are a form of change that ensures the continuity of the new output with the original model.

The change in the urban environment is inevitable in order to achieve the interaction between human and the surrounding environment [6]. The transformation of historic urban environments, as an attempt to reproduce space, has always been a paradoxical phenomenon. Transformation projects that aim at consolidating, reorganising, and revitalising the historic fabric usually face problems concerning the weakening of collective memory and the annihilation of place identity [7].

Urban landscape means the organizing and the visual cohesion of mix of Buildings, streets and spaces that creating the built environment [8]. The urban landscape could give indication of degree of evaluation of the urban space within the urban context, and clarifying the problems of the contrast between industry, social and commercial activities within the city centre and its impacts on the future of the city [9].

According to Rossi, the economic play an important role in transforming the city in both planning and formatting aspects, however, he ignored the social, political, and religious factors. He added that the assessing of transformation not related to space but measured by the time [10]. On the other hand, Celike mentioned that the social aspect play a significant role in transforming the urban forms, and there is a mutual relationships between social aspect and physical form of the city [11]. For Kostaf, the transformation in urban morphology connect with three main variables they are: plan, land use, and style. He also mentioned the necessity to deal with each one of them separately [12].

![Figure 1. The Landuse of city center of Al-Najaf](image)

The main characteristic of the current situation of the urban fabric of the city centre of Najaf is the deterioration, many valuable buildings are existing in the traditional centre in addition to many mosques and libraries, however most of the buildings that located on the main axises are using for commercial purposes are not belonging to the unique architectural style of the city [13]. The adoption of alien architectural styles which are far from the city spirit and disconnected with the inherited Islamic architecture, in addition to the lack of the maintenance of traditional houses, in addition to the permeation of the commercial activities within the local axises, leads to losing the hierarchy in the old city centre [14].
Accordingly, the modern transformations represent a real threat for the traditional urban fabric of
the old city centre since it's not suitable for a historical city such Najaf, particularly in regard to the
overlapping of the different land use activities which is negatively impact on the urban landscape of
the old city [15].

The research problem is the impact of the urban transformations on the urban landscape of the city
centre of Najaf.

The aim of the research is to clarify the impact of the urban transformations on the urban landscape
of the city centre of Najaf [16].

This aim will be achieved through the following objectives [17]:
1. Evaluate the current situation of the urban landscape of the traditional city centre of Najaf.
2. Identify the transformations that happened on the traditional city centre of Najaf, and what are
the reasons that led to those transformations.
3. What’s the future vision to adopting the transformations of the urban landscape of the city
centre of Najaf, [18]?
4. What are the appropriate instruments to activate the social engagement in order to developing
the traditional city centre of Najaf?

The main hypothesis of the research that the outputs of the social intellectual transformations will
affect the city development, since those outputs will formatting the main components of the city[19],
in addition to creating the place for those components to interact each other in it[20].

Figure 2. The current situation of the urban landscape of traditional city centre of Najaf [4].

2. Research design (Methodology)
In order to validate the impact of the urban transformations on the urban landscape of the traditional
city centre of Najaf, an empirical study have been done via questionnaire.

The questionnaire form has been prepared to include three main parts which are: The first part
focusing on assessing the current situation of the urban landscape of traditional city centre of Najaf
and the transformations that happened recently in it which includes 12 questions. The second part
discuss the purpose to change the traditional urban landscape of the city centre of the Najaf" in case
the change is imposed or it’s according to a real need" which including 6 questions. While the third
part interpreted via 13 questions dealing with the future vision for the urban landscape of the city
centre of Najaf.

The samples have been chosen for the questionnaire involved 40 experts, most of them
professionals in architecture and urban planning. 22 of them were holding PhD while 12 have master’s
degree, the others as BSc. About 58% of the participants working in academic institutions, whereas
30% of them in governmental institutions, and the 12% others as private sector. Moreover, 20% of the
participants have long experience more than 20 years, while 62% of them their experience between 10 to 20 years, and the 18% others 1-4 years. It wealthy to mention, that more than 65% of the experts are belonging to Najaf built environment, while the others have either working in universities or other academic institutions inside the Najaf, or they are working in other governmental or private sector institutions including the holy shrine itself. However, all of them are familiar with the city and its centre.

3. The Results

Current situation of the urban landscape of traditional city centre of Najaf and the transformations that happened recently:

3.1.1. Evaluating the current situation. The finding from empirical study shows that 50% of the participants mentioned that the city centre is represent an output of multi experiences of the previous generations about the relation with the place during different periods. In this regard, about 40% of experts stated out that city centre considers as a mental image based on the interaction between the visual and movement axises in the city centre. The located of holy shrine in the city centre of Najaf and the rituals of pilgrims who daily visit this shrine highly impact the urban landscape and creating a sort of uniqueness for the city centre.

3.1.2. The main problems of the traditional city centre. The results shown that there are around 74.5% of the participants mentioned that the increasing of the populations in city centre represent the main problem of this area, at the same time the services at the area is not fit for the number of populations. 25% of the experts justified the problem to the absence of the traditional values of the place and losing of identity sense, while 22.5% of them said that the reason is related to the economy since there is a need to reactivating the land use of the city centre.

The results clarifying the lack of comprehensive planning studies for the traditional centre, in addition to unsuitable of the previous plans with the average of population growing. moreover, the issue of identity of the city has not taken in consideration in previous plans, since the city of Najaf is an attractive city for people, which led to competition between functions of land use of the city centre according only to economic need, without give enough attention to other factors such as historical and traditional factors that impacted the creation of the city.

87.5% of the participants mentioned that the absence of the legislations and regulations was a reason that encourages the transformations particularly on for the old and traditional cities. Moreover, around 49% of the experts highlighted that the disconnection between the local community and the town council of the city about the future vision of the urban city centre is an essential reason could support the transformations.

3.1.3. The urban transformations that happened in the city of Najaf. In regard to the transformations that happened recently in the city, most of the participants 82% highlighted that the city passed under transformations processes which impacted the urban built environment of the city.

About 55% of the experts stated out that the transformations happened in the whole of the city, while 22.5% of them mentioned that huge transformations happened on the modern sectors of the city. On the other hand, around 20% of them emphasized that the huge transformations impacted traditional centre of the city.

On the contrary, 37% of the participants has mentioned that the traditional city centre were not highly impacted by the transformations that happened because the historical form of most of the old city still conservative, although many traditional buildings have been demolished and many other suffers of decay.
Figure 3. 3D model of the city centre of Najaf [4].

Figure 4. The skyline of the traditional city centre of Najaf [4].
3.1.4. Justification of the transformations. Regarding the reasons behind the transformations that happened in urban built environment of Najaf, the results showed that the economic purpose has achieved about 90% of the participant’s responses, because the economic represent the main driver of the changing and transforming of the city centre which happened as a result of the pressure from the private sector who owned the most of commercial and tourism activities. Accordingly, many hotels and restaurants have built which have huge heights that created a real threaten for the visual dominance of the holy shrine on a city skyline.

3.2. The need to change the urban landscape of the city centre:
3.2.1. The suitability of transformations for the city future. The results show that most of the participants of the questionnaire 70% agreed that there is a real need to change the urban landscape of the city centre of Najaf, in order to be more appropriate for the future and, at the same time, for the long history that the city own. 46% of the experts mentioned that the urban landscape of the city centre does not reflect the traditional styles of a historical city such Najaf. In contrary, about 32% of them emphasized that the urban landscape of the city centre does not meet the requirements of modern life.

3.2.2. The instrument of intervention: Most of the experts, more than 70%, emphasized that the intervention of changing should be through set a comprehensive plan to rehabilitate the traditional city centre and forcing the users to follow it, and never allowing to let this issue according to the desires of users and investors. while others, about 32%, states out that the change should be according to a limited rehabilitation plan for the city centre and should involving the stakeholders and the users. The results above clarifying the risks and barriers that may facing the re-development process of the traditional city centre. The main threaten represented by the insisting of the private sector to build hotels and multi-story commercial buildings to accommodate the number of pilgrims. However, the traditional urban fabric of the old city consisting of small housing and religious schools which considering as essential part that forming the traditional city identity.

3.2.3 Community participation. The majority of experts who take part in the questionnaire 90% agreed that the local community must involving in the future plans to develop the traditional city centre of Najaf, 47% of them mentioned that the participation of local community should be through NGO,
while 39% of them supported to be through the governmental institutions and avoid the individual decisions in developing processes that supported by only 11% of the participants.

3.3. The future vision for the urban landscape of the city centre of Najaf:
3.3.1. The appropriate ways for development: Most of the experts, around 60%, highlighted that it is possible to develop the traditional city centre of Najaf according to the enrich legacy that its own especially for the Muslims. Regarding the appropriate ways that should followed to develop the city centre; about 47% of experts encourage rehabilitation processes for the traditional city centre to solve the problems that appeared recently. Whereas 32% supported the conservation as the best way that should be follow. The other participants 21% preferring the developing process as the right way to achieve the aim.

3.3.2. The sustainability. Most of the experts, around 90%, agreed that the economic and social sustainability is a significant issue in regard to development of the traditional city centre. About 67% of them confirmed that the enhancement of the traditional elements in the urban landscape of the traditional city centre could be benefitted to strengthen the sustainability. In this regard, 58% of the participants mentioned that the sustainability could be achieved through activating the environmental and economic aspects of the built environment. Moreover, others highlighted that adding new activities that convenient with urban transformation is essential in order to support the tangible and intangible heritage of the traditional city centre.

3.3.3. The modern references. More than 80% of the experts highlighted that there is a need for new references in the traditional urban landscape of Najaf centre. About 52% of them mentioned that the focusing should be on the mental image and the visual interaction which resulted by movement of individuals in the traditional urban fabric of the city centre. 85% of the participants emphasized that the references considered as bedrock for controlling the transformations of the urban landscape, through benefit from the heritage buildings to provide a continuity of the traditional style as stated out by 67% of the experts. 57% of the responses supported the preservation of the tangible references, while 12% of them preferred demolishing of those references because it is suffering from decay and deterioration and it’s not appropriate for the contemporary landscape of the city.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

1. The city of Najaf has owned a distinctive architectural identity and legacy, as the others historical cities in the world, therefore the rehabilitation of the traditional city centre of the city in order to solve the problems that the city suffering from, must ensuring the continuity of the city identity. At the same time, it should be flexible to accommodate the modern transformations without affecting this identity.

2. The deterioration and decay are the main feature of the current situation of the urban landscape of the traditional city centre of Najaf, in addition to missing the unity for the buildings in regard to the height and style.

3. The city of Najaf has suffered from many urban transformations, which affected the principles of planning which created the traditional city centre, as an Islamic and Arabic city, which is negatively affected the identity, and created many problems such as visual pollution for the urban landscape.

4. The modern transformations considered as an essential issue to get suitability for the modern era, however its impacts are depending on how deal with the old and new references of the urban landscape.

5. The overlapping between the land use and the visual pollution in addition to lack of maintenance and preservation processes are the main problems of the urban fabric in the area, which is a result of non-planned development.

6. There are some barriers facing the development processes at the traditional areas, such as the insisting of private sector to build hotels and multi-story commercial buildings in order to
accommodate the pilgrims, while the traditional urban fabric of the area consisted of small houses and religious schools which reflecting the traditional identity of the area.

7. The economic aspect is the main driver for the change and transformation processes in the traditional city centre, as a result of the pressure of the private sector on the development process and the and the spreading of the commercial and tourism land use in this area led to build hotels and restaurants, which threaten the dominance of the holy shrine in the city skyline.

8. The best approach to developing the traditional city centre of Najaf could be achieving through social and economic sustainability, since the enhancement of the traditional elements of the urban landscape will lead to strength the sustainability.

5. **Recommendations**

1. There is a need to issue new legislations and laws that in order to control the urban transformations in the traditional cities’ centres, and encourage the community participation, including experts and NGO, in developing plans of these centres.

2. The intervention of changing should be through set a comprehensive rehabilitation plan for the traditional city centre, and forcing the users and stakeholders to follow it, in order to keep the cohesion of the old city and ensure the continuity of the city heritage which achieve via the traditional urban fabric.

3. The necessity to add new activities in order to support the tangible and intangible heritage of the city and contribute to achieve the social sustainability and activate the economic aspect of the built environment.

4. Re-evaluate the role of the modern references that play in the traditional urban landscape via focusing on the mental image and the visual interaction within the traditional urban fabric.

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