REVITALIZING HISTORICAL URBAN DISTRESSED AREAS: INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCES FROM NEIGHBOURHOODS SARAH CAMP AND GAYLANI CAMP, BAGHDAD, IRAQ

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Revitalizing historical urban distressed areas: Innovative experiences from neighbourhoods Sarah camp and Gaylani camp, Baghdad, Iraq

Specific approaches to the revitalization process of distressed urban areas has become one of the intensive focuses of the discourse of spatial and urban planners, architects, sociologists and experts from various other professions. They fully reflect the undergoing paradigm shift in spatial planning: going from a fully expert based professional activity to a versatile process integrating plethora of actors. Recent experiences have shown that the physical renovation of the distressed area and an interdisciplinary approach based on the collaborative effort of the stakeholders is necessary to be successful in this effort. Historical areas with distinctive semiotics and a unique mental landscape are especially important concerning building and further developing the place’s identity, cooperative communities and sustainable development. Our contribution is focused on old Armenian neighbourhoods in Baghdad (Sarah Camp, Gaylani/Armenian camp) that possess great historical value and are distinctive parts of Baghdad’s urban morphology and city identity. Presented research was based upon personal interviews conducted with the employees of Baghdad Municipality (Department of Studies and Research), members of the Armenian community in Baghdad, especially in the Armenian Orthodox Diocese, communication with members of the diaspora (Armenia, Europe and America), and field visits and tours in the two study areas and meetings with the Armenians living there. The main goal of this research was to investigate the opportunities of utilizing specific and innovative methods of spatial planning with regard to advancement of the civil society, social cohesion and community building in these specific neighbourhoods. Preserving the urban heritage, which is a part of the community/place identity, gives a sense of belonging and security necessary for sustainable development of any community, neighbourhood or city. The coordinated effort of strengthening local communities and encouraging mutual understanding as well as preserving the social fabric and mosaic of Iraqi society (multi-racial, ethnic, religious and sect) is necessary for balanced spatial development in general.

Key words: revitalization, peaceful coexistence, sustainability, community development, participative planning, city of Baghdad

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary innovative spatial planning, as balanced and sustainable spatial development management, extends beyond the pure land use regulation and effective use of information and communication technologies. Innovation in this context entails the implementation of a wide range of adaptable soft tools tailored to the specific needs of a given place, locality, community or regional context. These innovative approaches focus on building active communities at the local and regional levels, empowering people to enhance their quality of life through participation, education, information and efficient technology utilisation (e. g. Allmendinger 2002 and 2009 or Finka et al. 2018). Concepts like Forester’s (1989) ‘communicative planning’, Healy’s (1997 and 2003) ‘planning through debate’, her later term
‘inclusive discourse’ and Fischler’s ‘collaborative planning’ (see Healey 2003) are fundamentally transformations of Habermas’ critical theory (e. g. McCarthy 1981) applied to planning practices. Achieving balanced, sustainable and successful spatial development necessitates cultural continuity and compatibility (see Healey 1997 and 2003 and Jaššo 2015) and requires a consensus on societal values and participation of various actors and stakeholders. Integrating diverse cultural contexts into just and sustainable spatial concepts is one of the most critical challenges in the current highly volatile society, as noted by Forrester (e. g. Forrester 1989 and Mantysalo 2005). This integration requires a profound transformation of the planner’s role from a highly technically skilled expert to a moderator, facilitator and negotiator who can foster consensus and cooperation (see e. g. Stiftel 2000). A rising number of participating actors and their ambiguous behaviour makes planning, an activity with an open end.

One of the most important factors in contemporary planning is a cohesive, highly motivated and resilient community. Community sustainability is directly linked to sustainable territorial development and the development of local economies that are socially responsible, economically viable and environmentally sound. This multifaceted process relies on practical cooperation and participation of many actors, including public authorities, private sector representatives and citizens. Contemporary communities undergo a dynamic reform processes, unlike traditional communities that were rather static with regard to the territorial dimension. Recent communities are fuzzy, without firm territories (for further insights, see e. g. Sandercock, in Allmendinger 2009), displaying rather volatile behavioural patterns. Healey argues (2003, p. 107) that participation in community planning re-shapes even the self-concept and personal identity of actors. Nevertheless, this is the only way how to identify community needs and potentials, find appropriate interventions and implement innovative solutions.

The current global situation presents an array of significant challenges within this process. Climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, migration and fragmentation processes pose threats to the smooth and successful progression of community development worldwide. In addition, the development of civil society, the transition towards a knowledge-based economy, demographic shifts, heightened environmental awareness, increased fiscal concerns and more nuanced views of growth define the framework for territorial and economic development as well as the role of the public sector in it. This leads to the emergence of new qualitative and quantitative demands and opportunities for smart growth (Finka et al. 2018).

The features distinguishing intelligent and innovative approaches in community building may vary from place to place and from one sphere of community life to another. Nonetheless, smart growth, in general, entails investing time, creativity and resources in innovative solutions. It involves revitalising communities and developing robust local and regional economies to create sustainable employment opportunities that align with the available labour market potential. Moreover, places with unique historical value play a pivotal role in this process, as they shape the mental landscape and cognitive maps of their inhabitants in a distinct manner. This, in turn, fosters the motivation of local people to preserve their social identity and transmit their values from one generation to the next. These places can serve as virtual platforms for creating a positive image of the location and engaging in positive place branding.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main goal of this research was to investigate the opportunities of utilizing specific and innovative methods of participative spatial planning with regard to the advancement of the civil society, social cohesion and community building in specific Baghdad neighbourhoods of Christian Armenian communities, which display a set of unique characteristics not present in other parts of the city. Our research was focused on the potential of innovative approaches to the revitalization process of distressed urban areas under special circumstances of post-war recovery. Although the Armenian communities have been always inseparable parts of the social fabric of the city of Baghdad, their position in current Iraqi society is nowadays challenged by many new trends and they have to find their new roles in a highly volatile environment. The fragile social fabric of contemporary Baghdad is highly dependent on the cooperation of local actors, split apart into many competing factions, sects, national/religious minorities and social groups. Our contribution strives to find and investigates the cooperation potential of one of the oldest and most traditional minority groups in Baghdad.

The research included steps, methods and procedures as follows:

– review of the theoretical literature related to specific approaches to the revitalization process of distressed areas;

– review of the literature that relates to the Iraqi Armenians as well as the media reports published on social media;

– personal interviews conducted with the employees of Baghdad Municipality/Department of Studies and Research, members of the Armenian community in Baghdad, especially in the Armenian Orthodox Diocese, and communication with members of the diaspora (Armenia, Europe and North America). Research was conducted between March and April 2022, when 33 respondents were interviewed. The conducted interviews were semi-structured, focused on specific questions of spatial dimension of community building, revitalization process, social cohesion and local identity, which is perceived differently by particular actors and social groups. Answers and opinions of participants were anonymized and served as the main tool for subsequent content analysis. Mutual comparison and cross-checking of provided answers and expressed attitudes served for further precision of research conclusions. Selection of the respondents was based upon their roles as opinion leaders in examined communities, assuming that they represent typical point of view of respective community, are able to generalize certain ideas/thoughts and possess deep knowledge of the examined area;

– desk research focused on analysis of drawings, maps, photographs and other visual aids related to examined areas;

– repeated field visits and tours in the two study areas and meetings with the Armenians living there and observation of daily dynamics of social life in investigated communities;

– consultations with the Iraqi Ministry of Planning on the latest general census of the population in Iraq, researchers from the University of Technology in Baghdad on the latest research in spatial planning, employees of Urban and Regional Planning Center for Graduate Studies / University of Baghdad, employees of Al-Mustansiriya University/College of Arts / Department of Anthropology and members of the Christian Endowment Office and other religions in Iraq.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Social participation and community development, as defined by Wates and Knevitt (1987) entails active involvement of the local community in the development of programmes and plans that directly affect their community. The Rehabbed Med project (for the rehabilitation of traditional Mediterranean architecture) has established a framework for participatory action in the context of neighbourhood and urban space rehabilitation, involving multiple stakeholders, each with specific roles in the process. These stakeholders include government authorities, a technical team, clients, social organisations, citizens and other users of urban space.

Participation programmes and projects can be based on different models. They may adopt a top-down approach, where authorities present programs to citizens, or a bottom-up approach, characterised by initiatives led by local actors within the general public (Alzouhayli 2015). Alternatively, a combination of these models may involve the public sector, playing the role of the catalyser in bottom-up activities.

In essence, participatory planning represents a collaborative effort by involved parties in common planning activities for future development actions. Although the agenda is not entirely open, each party brings its own agendas, specialisations and responsibilities. The challenge lies in sorting out and reaching a consensus on consistent actions. Various methods and tools have been developed to facilitate the organisation and alignment of common agendas (Ghanem 2010).

Community development means ‘a social process that empowers individuals’ society to become more capable and efficient in facing the requirements of living and overcoming. However, their conditions are not appropriate, and this process needs technological assistance from the government and organizations volunteers’ (Kaddoumi 2008, p. 21).

Creating a qualified local administration as a part of local governance system is a crucial step in this journey. However, building an effective local administration system does not solely involve the issuance of special laws or decrees. Instead, the local administration should be aware of its role in governance system institutionalizing the position of governmental structures in governance (participative and multiactors) processes looking for a harmony between legal frameworks and the conditions and development requirements. This entails expanding the scope of citizens’ participation and their role in the governance process, reducing the state’s roles, and granting the private sector and civil society institutions a more significant role in the development process. This approach aligns with the recommendations of international institutions on world development, emphasising themes such as ‘making the state closer’, ‘transforming to localities’ and ‘achieving decentralisation and rethinking’. Therefore, local administration assumes a vital role within the internal government system, actively contributing to national development and maintaining a close connection with the citizens, originating from the heart of the community (Al-Khansa 2016).

The cornerstone of local development is adopting a bottom-up approach, making the development of local communities the primary starting point for overall societal progress. This approach hinges on activating all the resources within a local community, recognizing these resources and qualifications as essential elements for driving change and ensuring its continuity. Therefore, effective work is an imperative necessity for development.
Participatory democracy represents the latest trend in achieving local development and embodies various principles and foundations by establishing a cooperative relationship between official and non-official bodies, central and local. The aim is to integrate citizens into political life, involve them in decision making, and enable them to monitor local projects, aligning with global developments and advancing the local community whilst laying the groundwork for local development principles (Somaya and Boubacar 2019). Social innovation based upon effective participation of all actors present in the territory offers solutions to the budgetary, human and legal issues increasingly faced by city administrations. It plays a crucial role in identifying solutions for social issues that traditional market actors may not address. Social innovation can enhance social cohesion and promote new, sustainable ways of living for all segments of the population, including the younger generation (Bonneau 2015).

It is obvious that holistic concepts emphasize uniqueness, place identity and its existential values and overall rising significance of the participatory models of planning ahead of sidelined, older, strictly normative-regulatory approaches. Participative planning considers place/locality as a dynamic (not static) phenomenon. Keeping and maintenance of the unique qualities of the given place (Healey 2003) is one of the hallmarks of efficient participative planning.

CURRENT CONTEXT OF IRAQI SOCIETY

Iraqi society consists of a multiethnic, multi-religious sect population, converging on coexistence over one geographical area. Article 14 of the Republic of Iraq Constitution considers all Iraqis equal by the law without discrimination. Different ethnic groups (Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens) and religious groups (Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and Sabinas) are an integral part of the Iraqi state. Iraq boasted of different colours, ethnicities, and religions and as being the only country in the region that includes this beautiful mosaic, but the constant targeting of minorities permanently inflicts their flight from Iraq. Some ask, will we be able to preserve this mosaic?

A wave of minority violence, which some described as the “genocide of minorities”, ravaged many regions and led to the kidnapping and killing of religious leaders, threats and displacement of many families, and the destruction of churches and places of worship. Many churches have been bombed and destroyed by warfare, and the evacuation of residential areas inhabited by these minorities followed. Therefore, like the rest of Iraq’s governorates, Baghdad needs to establish a spirit of cooperation and uphold the principle of peaceful coexistence among different sects to revive and revitalize areas that have become deserted by their original inhabitants. The visit of Pope Francis to Iraq is a message of peace that carries spiritual meanings related to peaceful coexistence among religions.

Armenians in Iraq refers to residents and citizens in Iraq of Armenian ethnicity who recently settled in Iraq after fleeing the 1915 Armenian genocide. It is estimated that there are 10,000 – 15,000 Armenians living in Iraq. The number of Armenians in the years before the American occupation of Iraq in 2003 reached about 20 thousand Armenians (in Baghdad, specifically around 10,000 to 12,000). In Baghdad, their number was estimated at 5,000 people only. In general, the Armenians of Baghdad are divided into three Christian denominations (Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical). Most follow the Orthodox religion, so they are divided into three reli-
gious groups, each with its head (spiritual and administrative) – Al-Jamil (2010) and Yaseen (2015). Armenians have lived in different parts of Iraq, which help them to absorb and to integrate within Iraqi culture supported by their ability to communicate using the Arabic language. The Armenian identity is one of the tolerant identities that encourage a culture of coexistence and integration (Yaseen 2015). There are three regions in which the Armenians are concentrated in Iraq. The first is in the north and forms a semi-contiguous area that includes the governorates of Dohuk, Nineveh and Kirkuk. The second region is in Central Iraq and includes the province of Baghdad with the largest concentration of Armenians, and the third one is in the south, in the province of Basra.

BAGHDAD CASE STUDY

Our research was focused on a case study involving two historic neighbourhoods in Baghdad, which have traditionally been inhabited by the Christian Armenian community. Both of these neighbourhoods are in need of rehabilitation, as they have been abandoned by most of their original inhabitants. However, the urban structures in these areas still bear the memories, traits, history, and roots that stretch back several decades, representing their unique identity. They are a previous and versatile contribution to manifold Baghdad’s city identity.

The neighbourhoods serve several functions related to cultural activities, including hosting the Armenian Charitable Society, the Al-Mashreq Cultural Club and the Youth Sports Club. Additionally, there are retail stores, small markets, technical workshops for maintenance and essential services for households, such as water, electricity, sewage networks and air conditioning systems. Car maintenance workshops and auto spare parts stores are also part of the local economy. However, the distribution of these functions appears random, lacking a cohesive plan and a vision of future development. The influence and role of the Municipality of Baghdad and its district departments (Karrada) in these areas are nearly non-existent.

One of the challenges faced by these neighbourhoods is the low level of cultural awareness among many civil society components and the absence of a proper legal framework. This has negatively impacted the architectural and historical elements, public spaces and entire cultural heritage in the area. It is particularly visible in some historical alleys, which do not align with the architectural, historical, aesthetic and visual values of these historical buildings.

These neighbourhoods are closely connected to their neighbouring areas, with strong social, economic, and geographical ties. However, there is a lack of comprehensive planning to find suitable solutions that can restore and rehabilitate these ancient historical areas and integrate them with modern urban patterns, creating a harmonious environment that bridges different cultures present throughout history.

Urban safety in the area is relatively limited, and there are restrictions on personal freedoms and the expression of opinion. Despite these challenges, there is a prevailing sense of tolerance, familiarity, and mutual respect among members of the local community. Given the nature of Iraqi society, and most Arab societies in general, which are often clan-based, clans play a significant role in protecting their members in the face of societal situations and incidents. Many Christians in Baghdad seek refugium within their clans due to the absence of effective law enforcement and the weakness of state institutions, which have been plagued by financial and administrative corruption.
Sarah Camp

Sarah Camp is situated on the Rusafa side of Baghdad, in close proximity to the New Baghdad area and the Al-Ghadir neighbourhood. It is separated from the latter by the highway and Khaled Ibn Al-Walid Street, which leads to Investigation Square. In recent years, it has become an important area for Christians, hosting various significant social and religious centres. Notably, it is home to the Mashreq Social Club, a vital social hub, the headquarters of Al-Ofuk magazine (published by the patriarch of the ancient Eastern Church) and the Armenian Charitable Society (Figs. 1 and 2).

![Fig. 1. Sarah Camp, Baghdad](Source: Google Plus.)

![Fig. 2. Sarah Camp, Baghdad, Land-use plan](Source: Hussein (2022.).)

The area is now a complex industrial and commercial centre with many companies and shops, especially in the nearby area next to the Muhammad Al-Qasim Highway, where the most extensive complex for the wholesale sale of construction materials has been established. Today, Sarah Camp is characterised by its abundance of car repair garages and stores selling automotive spare parts. The bustling traffic on the streets has become a cause for concern. Despite having a Christian majority of 80% in the past (Yoseph 2006), they now constitute no more than 20%
of the population. The wave of terrorist incidents and bombings that struck the region after 2003 had a significant impact on the emigration of many Christians. This has led to shifts in the societal landscape, with many houses being divided into three to address the housing crisis. Unfortunately, the area has been neglected, resulting in a decline in its cleanliness and aesthetic appeal.

Even the original name (Sarah Camp) was erased from the official records by the Municipality of Baghdad, which assigned it the name ‘Riyadh Neighbourhood’ with the number 910, a name that does not reflect its historical significance. The public street has been transformed into a bustling industrial area, and the beauty often associated with this renowned street, sometimes referred to as ‘Paris Street’, has faded away. In the past, young men and women used to stroll on this street until well past midnight, and the street was hosting celebrations for various Christian occasions such as the Feast of the Cross, the Feast of the Splash of Water and other Christian festivals. The environment was characterised by its Christian identity, shared by Muslim friends, some of whom were fluent in the Alsworth language, which is spoken by a majority of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia and its surroundings. One of the notable aspects of Sarah Camp is the presence of a mosque named after Isa bin Maryam (‘peace be upon him’) in the old market, exemplifying the coexistence of different religious communities in the area (Al-Atabi 2017).

Gaylani (Armenian) Camp

This area is situated in the eastern part of Baghdad, Iraq, specifically in the direction of Rusafa. Historically, it boasted a Christian majority among its population. Gaylani Camp comprises a vibrant downtown neighbourhood, bordered to the north by the Mohammed Al Qassim highway, to the south by the Bab Al Sharqi area, to the east by Al Nidal Street, and to the west by the Sheikh Omar area (Figs. 3 and 4).

![Fig. 3. Gaylani (Armenian) Camp, Baghdad](source: Google Plus)

The foundational design is based on the zoning of Locality 133 (an Armenian Camp), an officially designated residential area by the Municipality of Baghdad. Furthermore, the Baghdad Development Plan 2030 retains this locality within the central business district of Baghdad. Notably, the development plan envisions this locality for future residential use, despite the varied uses surrounding it, including commercial and mixed use (Hussein 2022).
Records indicate that in 1920, there were between 600 to 800 Chaldean families in the area. They were displaced from the north in 1920. In 1980, the area began its transformation into an industrial and commercial hub, urging residents to relocate to other areas of Baghdad, such as Al-Nairiyah, Qayyarah, Al-Amin I and II, Al-Mashtal, Al-Ghadir and other neighbourhoods. By 1998, the number of families had dwindled to 97, with most belonging to the lower and middle class. Local churches saw weekly attendance of more than 150 primary school children and over 30 young men and women from secondary schools. In 2003, the number of Christian families in the Al-Gaylani Camp area decreased significantly, primarily due to immigration. The term ‘minority’ in a social and historical context within Iraq may not accurately describe certain groups given their deep historical and social roots in the region (Yoseph 2006).

Main problems and challenges

Both examined areas (Sarah Camp and Gaylani Camp) face multidimensional complex of various problems and challenges, often influencing each other in several layers and mutual interlinkages. Some of them are the burdens of the distant past, some have arisen as the consequences of recent turbulent and arduous way of Iraqi society towards more democratic and more participative forms of societal life. We are confronted with a high degree of complexity of problems which leads to a high complexity of possible interventions. For many years, the uncertain future of examined areas was highlighted by their problematic civic involvement in the
whole of Baghdad, a lack of societal ties among different social groups/sects in Iraq, an absence of appropriate data for prognosis, lack of visions and scenarios for the future of the examined areas and general lack of metropolitan/local sustainable strategies, plans and projects. Based on the methods used and the evaluation of the research results, we formulate the following particular problems and challenges, which we consider to be significant:

1. The proliferation of technical workshops for car maintenance and the sale of used and new cars has encroached upon the original residential urban structures. This has not only marred the visual aesthetics of the neighbourhood but also increased population density, lowered hygienic standards and downgraded aesthetic quality of urban environment.

2. The district lacks essential services, including schools for all educational levels, which allow the teaching of religious and native languages, particularly the Armenian language. (in comparison, Beirut hosts the Armenian University, catering to Armenians and Lebanese alike). Armenian “feel” of locality is thus sidelined and not institutionally backed and actively promoted.

3. Health service centres are needed to care for families, pregnant women and elderly patients.

4. Churches and places of worship require financial support, as they currently receive only limited funding from the Christian Endowment Office.

5. There has been both internal and external migration of Armenian people to safer northern governorates within Iraq and to diaspora communities in Europe, America and their motherland, Armenia. This accelerates the brain drain in already weakened Armenian communities.

6. The establishment of a hospital for the security forces (Ministry of Interior) in the open spaces around the Gaylani neighbourhood, which was originally designed as a public garden. The hospital is not sufficiently embedded in surrounding architectural structures and the urban context.

7. The district lacks an official designation by the Baghdad Municipality as an area of special historical value, making it vulnerable to unpredictable changes. Consequently, there is a need for an optimal architectural preservation strategy aligned with the area’s social, economic and physical context (Hussein 2022).

8. Geographical studies and information systems can be instrumental in categorizing neighbourhoods within cities, determining their functions, allocating public services, and planning transportation and communication networks, both within the urban locality and its surrounding regions. This is what is necessary to employ, especially in the Armenian neighbourhoods, in order to upgrade the urbanity and legibility of the area.

In order to face the above mentioned wide range of challenges, innovative and sustainable interventions must be durable, smart and must be supported by local communities. An integrative approach toward these challenges might include:

1. Preservation of the historical neighbourhood whilst maintaining its demographic and economic equilibrium. This entails utilising vacant houses for culturally and socially beneficial purposes, such as cultural clubs for children and artists, and spaces for artistic activities.
2. Enhancing infrastructure, including water, electricity and telecommunications facilities, as well as road and alley repairs. Implement a clear policy to address housing fragmentation, overcrowding, and redistribution.

3. Implementation of the residential-focused restoration plan to improve housing conditions through loans, removing the industrial activities and replacing them with housing. This involves new land-use definition and finding alternative locations for industrial workshops outside the old city.

4. Developing a comprehensive land-use plan and proposing amendments to the building control system in senior residential communities, involving the population in the planning and implementation processes.

5. Finding the funding alternatives, including collaboration with civil society organisations, finding common ground between the government and the private sector and promoting community engagement.

6. Leverage the presence of capable civic leaders who are willing to collaborate in providing top-tier services to the ordinary citizens, many of whom are long-time residents or their first-generation offspring, is vital. These leaders have actively contributed to initiatives aimed at cleaning and safeguarding the area, particularly during the tumultuous sectarian conflicts in 2005 and the subsequent years.

Drawing from the experience of rejuvenating Al-Mutanabi Street, the historic marketplace renowned for the trade of cultural and scientific books, manuscripts, and stationery (Fig. 5), it is conceivable to apply these lessons. However, the restoration efforts were primarily focused on storefronts, road improvements, and enhancing fundamental infrastructure. The intricate details of interior designs in heritage buildings, along with the comprehensive restoration, renovation or full rehabilitation of these structures, have not been addressed.

Fig. 5. Al-Mutanabbi Street, historic center of Baghdad
Source: Archive of Almalkale, F. M.

DISCUSSION

Reconstruction and rehabilitation are the most visible processes within the transformation of the urban fabric in contemporary Baghdad. Many areas still bear the scars of decay, neglect, wars or disputes. Rebuilding urban fabrics and their functional structures is imperative and considered one of the most effective operations that can be undertaken in Iraqi cities through the cooperation of local governments, residents and the state, with a focus on providing infrastructure and space for foreign investors. Community building and citizen involvement are fundamen-
tal prerequisites for any reconstruction and rehabilitation process. The higher the inner cohesion of the community and its commitment to renewal processes, the greater the potential for an overall enhancement of the quality of life in the respective place, location or city. The strong attachment of the people to a place also works to prevent spatial/social conflicts and can expedite the overall spatial development of the city.

The significance of the presented research lies in the potential to restore the social fabric of Iraq to its previous state and to build it in a manner capable of addressing present and future challenges. Communicative planning can be effective even in places where the tradition of using of collaborative/informal planning instruments is limited. This effectiveness is achievable only when participative planning is applied with great sensitivity, taking into consideration the local context and settings. According to Machler and Milz (2015, p. 39), “to know how to foster dialogue and how to create conditions in which good dialogue is fostered is a critical part of the planning”. Public participation can generate better decisions that align more closely with the needs of the community, are more enduring, and possess greater validity. Transparency in the decision-making process enhances the likelihood that decisions will withstand scrutiny. The effectiveness of participation processes is contingent on adequate funding and human resources, targeted measures, and the necessary time (Schöffel et al. 2014).

Despite these potential benefits, the general obstacles of participatory planning in Iraq are as follows:

– Challenges in accessing the target community due to safety concerns and the erosion of trust among different sects, stemming from sectarian conflicts and animosity. Especially participation in the processes involving actors from different cultural milieus is very rare and a culture of dialogue must be continuously built up. Lack of experience and deeply engraved mistrust are major obstacles;

– Difficulties in communicating with government and municipal authorities due to widespread administrative and financial corruption, which leads to deformation of the responsibility patterns, abuse of the rules and distortion of the transparency of the decision making process;

– Limited financial capacity of municipalities to fund rehabilitation projects;

– Influence of political parties on senior government positions, resulting in institutional weaknesses and lack of responsibility of politicians;

– Lack of community awareness leading to limited community participation in planning. Opinion leaders of many communities are defensive and conservative;

– Absence of effective leadership and local opinion leaders with good practices, planning is not considered as an open, transparent and sustainable societal process, but rather as a regulatory, distributive and power tool of the government and city management.

In light of the aforementioned obstacles, there is an urgent need to activate participatory planning throughout the entire state. The research's significance is underscored by its role in emphasizing the pivotal role of participatory planning in enhancing the development process of local communities. Both the analysed neighbourhoods, Sarah Camp and Gaylani Camp, exert a substantial influence not only at the local level, owing to their historical significance, but also on the broader identity of the city of Baghdad. These neighbourhoods encapsulate multiple layers
of Baghdad's historical memory, architectural language and urban semiotics. They function as micro-laboratories nurturing a participatory planning culture within highly distinctive local communities. By combining top-down approaches with grassroots-driven initiatives and informal activities, they address gaps in urban development strategies. Our forthcoming research endeavours will delve deeper into exploring the latent potential within local communities. We aim to assess their capacity to acquire new knowledge, adapt to evolving circumstances, and innovate solutions that can be applied at the city or national level. This approach embodies the fundamental principle of ‘thinking globally and acting locally’. Armenian communities, distinguished by their profound sense of belonging, attachment to place, and strong identification with their environment, could offer remarkable examples of resilient social communities and social learning within the context of relatively unstable social structures in Baghdad.

Unfortunately, no measures have been adopted yet to protect these historical areas. For example, in the 1980s, a plan was devised to relocate auto spare parts shops and car maintenance workshops to a dedicated industrial area. However, Iraq’s entry into the eight-year war with Iran disrupted the plan’s implementation. Moreover, the neighbourhoods have faced issues with the distortion of their administrative borders due to the construction of heterogeneous buildings. The social fabric of these areas has been impacted by internal and external migration, driven by unemployment, unequal job opportunities and the relative safety situation in Baghdad after 2003.

Additionally, there have been no plans to safeguard the distinctive features and identity of this area, which includes seven churches representing various Christian denominations in Iraq and a closed church of the Assyrian Christ (located in Gaylani Camp).

A fundamental aspect of most Armenian neighbourhoods is their solidarity and strong inner social cohesion. These neighbourhoods are seen as a collective entity by the Armenians, encompassing Muslims who speak the Armenian language. This unique characteristic can be harnessed to develop these neighbourhoods, thereby creating new employment opportunities and preserving the heritage of Armenian neighbourhoods. These areas can become tourist destinations, forming an integral part of Baghdad’s genuine identity. The central issue lies in achieving equality and justice for minorities in Iraq, which necessitates legal legislation to safeguard their national rights, similar to the more prominent nationalities within society (Asadourian 2021).

The most pressing dilemma we anticipate in the future pertains to curbing the encroachment of technical workshops into the alleys of the Armenian neighbourhoods and addressing the factors driving migration, both internal and external. A pivotal strategy to tackle this challenge is the formulation of investment financing plans to promote the development of these areas. We propose to galvanise collective efforts and innovative ideas to establish an investment fund dedicated to financing development plans aligned with contemporary urban principles. These plans should be harmonious with the unique environment and characteristics of the historical Armenian neighbourhoods (Asadourian 2021).

Challenges in accessing the target community persist due to safety concerns and the erosion of trust among various sects within society, fuelled by strife and animosity, often manipulated to fabricate sectarian conflict. Moreover, communica-
tion with government and municipal authorities is hampered by the widespread presence of administrative and financial corruption. Therefore, it becomes imperative to activate participatory planning across all regions of the state. The research’s significance lies in its capacity to highlight the role of participatory planning in supplementing the development of local communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The rehabilitation and revitalisation of historically significant areas present complex challenges in contemporary participative spatial planning. To successfully conclude this process, it is imperative to deploy a wide array of innovative tools, spanning from technical instruments like GIS maps to softer tools that rely on the commitment and participation of local stakeholders. It is crucial to restore and actively shape the inherent potential and timeless historical values of the location, making it an integral element of territorial identification, a source of togetherness, and a point of attachment for local residents. Historical sites hold immeasurable importance in the mental maps of inhabitants, often imbuing the entire city with a deeper sense of meaning. They are woven into the metatext of the city, delivering existential and spiritual significance to the locality and its physical structures. The revitalisation of historical sites is a delicate process that seeks equilibrium between tradition and modernity, the past and the future, and sometimes even peace in the face of conflict.

The presented research highlighted the need for a more robust utilisation of informal and innovative methods of spatial planning and community development even in situations, where formal tools are lacking and institutional back up is not present or is insufficient. Our experiences have shown the deep resilience of communities based upon shared values and strong inner cohesion. This might be one of the decisive factors in the slow and arduous processes of urban renewal and transformation of post war societies with many hidden issues and barriers of the reconciliation process. The fragmented social fabric of a large metropolis (Baghdad in our case) might get an inspiration and boost from experiences of relatively cohesive, though partially closed communities and serve as good example as “the planning in shaken and ambiguous environment” which is lacking an established planning tradition, broader societal consensus or shared vision. Social innovations (e.g. community planning, open dialogue) must be merged with technological innovations (e.g. GIS instruments) and must be promoted by municipal authorities as well as the city representatives. An extraordinary role is played by community leaders/opinion leaders who serve as distinctive role models in such an environment.

The interlinkage between the global megatrends and local knowledge is essential for any innovative spatial development and experiences from Iraq might play a significant role in this process. Finka and Kluvánková (2015, p.602) argue that “studying and managing complex social and biophysical systems is a tremendous challenge for human society in an increasingly globalized world. Such systems can adapt to disturbances and may become vulnerable to the regime changes caused by many contemporary socio-economic processes such as market dynamics and property rights changes. This situation can lead to the inevitable collapse of traditional systems. However, the flexibility of rules, efficient use of local knowledge, self-organisation, and legitimacy of an increased number of decision-making actors
may create the prerequisite conditions for renewal and increase the adaptive response to external disturbances”. Planning is not so much concerned with “producing a plan as with gaining a better understanding of the problems we face now and, in the future, to make better decisions now” (Mukhopadhyay 2015, p. 40).

Sandercock articulated a theory for planning in multicultural and multiethnic societies (Ldrea 2013). She contends that contemporary civil society, characterised by its rich diversity, tends to resist the imposition of identities and the sense of alienation. Social movements become agents of change in such contexts. Consequently, focusing on the city from a social perspective is crucial, emphasising the need to reclaim cultural identity before addressing material claims. Sandercock’s perspective envisions a just city that elevates cultural uniqueness and seeks to define it using methods other than the Western scientific knowledge often employed by expert planners. This approach redefines the relationships between planners and participating stakeholder groups. In this context, Sandercock (Ldrea 2013) aligns with Hailey’s emphasis on the value of accumulated ‘local knowledge’ and the questioning of ‘expert knowledge’. Planning methodology should rely on dialogue among conflicting parties to express their concerns to one another. This approach requires an open, communicative planning, drawing upon negotiation and mediation to address conflicts with the direct involvement of those affected. It also calls for the promotion of policies that foster integration and tolerance among cultures. Only if these principles of participative planning culture are sensitively respected and further developed, contemporary Iraqi planning discourse can yield positive outcomes.

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REFERENCES


REVITALIZÁCIA PROBLÉMOVÝCH HISTORICKÝCH MESTSKÝCH ŠTRUKTÚR: INOVATÍVNE SKÚSENOSTI Z MESTSKÝCH ŠTVRTÍ SARAH CAMP A GAYLANÍ CAMP, BAGHDAD, IRAK

Špecifické prístupy k revitalizácii postihnutých mestských častí sa stávajú jedným z ohnisk intenzívnych diskusí medzi priestorovými/mestskými plánováčmi, geografií, architektmi, sociológmi a odborníkmi z ostatných vedných disciplín. Odrážajú súčasnú prebiehajúcu paradigmatickú zmenu v priestorovom plánovaní, ktoré sa mení z procesu plne spočívajúceho na expertnej znalosti na otvorený a flexibilný proces integrujúci množstvo aktérov, využívajúc ich znalosti, motiváciu a záujem. Nedávne skúsenosti dokazujú, že iba fyzická revitalizácia postihnutého územia nie je postačujúca a je potrebný interdisciplinárny prístup založený na spoločnom úsilí všetkých dotknutých aktérov. Historické územia s jedinečnou mestskou sémiotikou a unikátnou mentálnou krajinou sú mimoriadne dôležité v procese rozvíjania identity miesta, spolupracujúcich komunit a udržateľného mestskeho rozvoja. Môžu byť neoceniteľnou súčasťou celovej identity mesta a cenným faktorom v zvyšovaní kvality života a tvorbe udržateľných komunit.

Náš príspevok je zameraný na staré arménske komunity v Bagdade, ktoré predstavujú pre mesto historickú hodnotu a sú jedinečnou súčasťou urbánskej morfólogie a identity mesta. Arménska identita patrí k najzachovanejších a zároveň k najdozorčitejším zdiela hlavné hodnoty celej irackej spoločnosti a je jej cennou konštitučnou súčasťou. Naviac, arménske komunity žili v rôznych častiach Íránu, čo im umožnilo mnoho získat mesta a integrovať sa tak do spoločnosti. Arménska identita je jednou z identít podporujúcich kultúru tolerancie a mierovej koexistencie. Náš výskum bol zameraný na arménske kresťanské komunity žijúce v Bagdade v históriách štvrtí, ktoré sa v roku 2006 výrazne zmenili. Po tom tohoto výsledku sa nemajú slyšať len katastrofické náznaky rozpadu arménskej komunity, ale aj rôzne prípady, ktoré ukazujú na spôsob, ako arménska identita sa spracúvala a ako sa to prejavilo v spoločnosti.

Výsledky výskumu a analýzy boli získané v rámci projektu "Revitalization of Historical Urban Structures: Innovative Experiences from Baghdad, Iraq". Projekt bol financovaný Majstrovstvom v Architektúre a Urbanizácii a je rozdelený do piatich hlavných čiastí, ktoré sa venujú rozvoju historických miest v Iraku. Výsledky sú publikované v článku "Revitalization of Historical Urban Structures: Innovative Experiences from Baghdad, Iraq" v časopise "GEOGRAFICKÝ ČASOPIS / GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNAL".
števy oboch skúmaných mestských štvrtí, konzultácie s pracovníkmi ministerstva plánovania v Bagdade, analýza výsledkov posledného cenzu v Iraku, konzultácie s pracovníkmi Urban and Regional Planning Center for Graduate Studies/University of Baghdad, výskumníkmi z Al-Mustansiriya University/College of Art (Department of Anthropology) a pracovníkmi Christian Endowment Office and other religions in Iraq.

Hlavným cieľom výskumných aktivít bolo preskúmať možnosti využitia špecifických a inovatívnych metód participatívneho priestorového plánovania s ohľadom na možnosť čeliť hrozbám, ktorým sú vystavené štvrté vzhľadom na nepriaznivý mestský vývoj v okolitých štruktúrach. Podpora pocitu bezpečia a podpora občianskej spoločnosti, sociálnej kohézie a tvorby kvalitných komunit je mimoriadne dôležitým predpokladom úspechu v tejto oblasti popri zabezpečení práv menšín na celoštátnej úrovni a ich vťahnutí do procesu budovania celonárodnej spolupatričnosti. Zachovanie mestského kultúrno-historického dedičstva, ktoré je súčasťou identity komunity/miesta, je cenným príspevkom k rozvoju spolupatričnosti a bezpečia. Koordinované úsilie zamietané na posilnenie lokálnych komunít a vzájomného pochopenia, ako aj zachovanie pestrých sociálnej štruktúry a mozaiky irackej spoločnosti (multirassová, multietnická a multináboženská) je nevyhnutným predpokladom cieľa a predstavuje cenný príspevok do súčasného diskurzu v rámci priestorového plánovania, urbánnej sociológie či humannej geografie.

Rehabilitácia a revitalizácia historicky významných území je výzvou pre súčasné inovatívne priestorové plánovanie. Aby bol toto proces, je nutné využívať celý rad inovatívnych nástrojov: od technických (napr. dátové vrstvy GIS a mapy) až po takzvané mäkké nástroje založené na participácii a motivácii lokálnych aktérov. Vnútorný potenciál a nadčasové historické hodnoty daného miesta by mali ostať zachované a mali by byť vedľa neho identifikované a spolupatričnosti a vždy miestnych obyvateľov. Historicky cenné miesta sú dôležité súčasťou cieľa a oplemenných mapa obyvateľov a prispievajú tak k tvorbe identity mesta ako celku. Súčasťou „metatextu“ mesta a dodávajú lokalite a jej fyzickým štruktúram existenciálny a duchovný význam. Revitalizácia takýchto historicky cenných lokalít je vždy krehkým procesom hľadania rovnováhy medzi tradíciou a moderným životom, minulostou a budúcnosťou a niekedy aj medzi sporom a dohodou.

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