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Culture-led Regeneration in Historical and Cultural Areas: The Case of a Historical Quarter in Mashhad, Iran

By
Sepideh Afsari Bajestani & Ehsan Ranjbar

Abstract

Despite extensive current literature confirming the significant contribution of culture to urban regeneration and the rise of culture-led regeneration as a key approach for developing urban areas rich in cultural heritage, a critical question remains: Which specific strategies should be prioritised and adapted within the culture-led regeneration process? This paper examines the role of culture-led regeneration in enhancing the quality of cultural and historical districts in Mashhad, Iran. Based on a critical literature review, it presents a conceptual framework for culture-led regeneration, considering different approaches and their appropriate spatial strategies: competitive-led, community-led, and creative-led. Building upon this conceptual framework and drawing on a case study methodology, the paper qualitatively evaluates the integration of culture into current development initiatives in a cultural and creative area in Mashhad. The findings indicate that current urban regeneration initiatives tend to prioritise profit-driven and competitive-led approaches, often with a limited conceptualisation of arts and culture. Subsequently, using the Delphi technique, the framework is employed to propose an alternative model for culture-led regeneration for the selected area. The findings of the Delphi technique emphasise the importance of prioritising community-led and creative-led strategies for the success of culture-led regeneration in the area. The paper concludes by discussing practical implications for the design of the area based on the proposed model of culture-led regeneration.

Keywords: Culture-led Regeneration, Spatial Strategies, Urban design, Historical and Cultural District, Mashhad, Iran

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Introduction

In recent decades, various factors, including neoliberal and globalisation processes, the desire for entrepreneurial competencies, and the requirements of a service-based economy, have propelled cities towards a change in the utilisation of culture (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1994; Lotfi, 2011). In this context, culture-led urban regeneration has become an effective tool for urban policymakers worldwide. In this approach, culture is considered the primary driver of regeneration (Evans, 2005). Some examples of culture-led regeneration include repurposing former industrial districts and derelict buildings into multiple active uses such as museum complexes, education and cultural centres, constructing iconic cultural buildings, and investing in industrial spaces for creative production (Evans, 2008; Gunay & Dockmeci, 2012).

Scholarly literature has argued that putting culture at the heart of urban development can contribute to the revitalisation of former industrial centres (Jones & Evans, 2008), restore public life and local identity (Miles & Paddison, 2005), and enhance the cities' competitiveness and its image (Evans, 2015; Keating & Frantz, 2004; Northall, 2008). However, several criticisms have been levelled at their implementation. The criticisms are partly due to the inappropriate transfer of strategies between contexts, undermining existing local conditions and resources. Particularly, the excessive emulation of the first movers of culture-led regeneration projects, such as flagship projects and large-scale events, have been often insensitive to local particularities (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1994; García, 2004; Zukin, 1995; Middleton & Freestone, 2008). It is also argued that the role of culture in urban regeneration is motivated by contradictory aims and aspirations, such as supporting community benefits and promoting place image to attract tourists and professionals (McCarthy, 2006). In this regard, a growing area of research is exploring the appropriateness of different forms of culture-led regeneration, prioritising context-specific adaptation over generalised policies that solely emphasise the role of arts and culture in urban regeneration. Therefore, urban policymakers should be concerned with understanding diverse forms of culture-led regeneration and their specific adaptability to different contexts.

Within the academic literature in Iran, several studies have acknowledged the importance of culture in urban regeneration (Ranjbar and Afsari Bajestani, 2017). Pourzakarya and Fadaie Nezhad Bahramjerdi (2020) demonstrated how local cultural and creative industries could be employed to develop a creative and cultural quarter that significantly improves the socio-economic and infrastructural quality of citizens' lifestyles in Rasht, Iran. Lak et al. (2020) investigated how valuable historical centres have been subject to abandonment and deterioration and analysed the potential of culture-led regeneration based on heritage tourism in the historic city of Birjand, Iran. Lak and Hakimian (2019)

discussed the potential of culture-led regeneration to improve local identity and sense of belonging in Birjand's historical places. Ghahremani and Hashemi (2018) studied how physical and spatial interventions in one of Mashhad's cultural and historical districts have contributed to urban competitiveness. In identifying viable culture-led regeneration strategies within historic cities of Iran, the study by Ebrahimi Ghorbani et al. (2021) in Kermanshah underscores the paramount importance of enhancing the quality of the physical environment.

In this study, rather than focusing on specific forms of culture-led regeneration, we aim to analyse the applicability of different forms of culture-led regeneration in one of Mashhad's cultural and historical districts, Iran, based on the importance of place-specific conditions in the success of policy transfer. This study aims to address the following research questions: 1. what are the diverse forms of culture-led regeneration? 2. How has culture been integrated into the renewal and regeneration of Mashhad's cultural and historical district? 3. What could serve as an alternative model of culture-led regeneration for the selected area?

To answer these research questions, this paper critically reviews the literature on various approaches to culture-led regeneration to develop a conceptual framework. The provided conceptual framework incorporates different approaches to culture-led regeneration and their related spatial strategies. The spatial strategies focus on urban design strategies, which are essential for enhancing the quality of the place in historical fabrics (Montgomery, 2003). Second, we employed a combination of qualitative methods, including field observation and reviewing planning and secondary documents, to analyse the current regeneration processes in the district. Third, we used the Delphi technique to develop an alternative model for culture-led regeneration in Mashhad's historic and cultural district. The analysis and discussion provide insights for adopting appropriate culture-led regeneration approaches and strategies in our case study and other cultural districts with similar contexts.

Culture-led regeneration and its different approaches: a conceptual framework

Over recent decades, the cultural aspect of urban development has become increasingly influential in policy-making due to several factors, including 1) restructuring of the urban economy, marked by a transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, 2) declining urban fabrics, 3) neoliberal governance, and 4) demographic changes, social movement, and political shifts (Grodach, 2017; Robertz, 2000; Vickery, 2007; Jones & Evans, 2008). These factors have compelled cities to adopt new strategies with greater attention to cultural amenities, design, and creative industries in order to revive urban economies, make societal and

environmental betterments, and broaden access to culture and social inclusion (Stern & Seifert, 2010; Zukin, 1995).

A classic international example of culture-led regeneration is Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum. The museum was designed as a “cultural anchor and signature building” in Bilbao’s declining industrial city in northern Spain to promote tourism and improve the image of central urban areas (Jones & Evans, 2008, p. 126). This flagship cultural building made an outstanding contribution towards urban regeneration and has been replicated worldwide, as in the case of Tate Modern and Shard of Glass on the London Docklands (Middleton & Freestone, 2008). Over time, further connotations and sophistication have been added to culture-led regeneration to extend the focus of cultural redevelopment initiatives towards enhancing the quality of life and ensuring a closer connection with local communities (Basset, 1993; Grodach, 2017; Evans, 2005; Bianchini & Parkinson, 1994; Mould & Comunian, 2015; Richard & Wilson, 2006).

In reviewing the literature, we found different models of culture-led regeneration overlapping in objectives, strategies, and the community of focus. These different models can be classified under three general approaches (Table 1): 1) competitive-led, towards market-based approaches emanating from mere economic goals; 2) creative-led, focusing on cultural and creative industries and creative production; 3) community-led, with the main emphasis of community empowerment. In what follows, we will discuss different approaches to culture-led regeneration, differences in their community of focus, and their related spatial strategies.

Table 1 - Different approaches to culture-led regeneration based on the models introduced in the literature

Approaches	Models in the literature			
Competitive-led approach	Urban design-led reconfiguration (Vickery, 2007)	City boosterism (Griffiths, 1995)	Entrepreneurial; Creative class (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007); Creative Class (Florida, 2002)	Consumerist model (Bianchini, 1989); Cultural consumption (Binns, 2005)
Creative-led approach	Arts-led civic development (Vickery, 2007)	Cultural industries (Griffiths, 1995)	Cultural Production (Binns, 2005)	
Community-led approach	Creative-led social renewal (Vickery, 2007)	Promoting civic identity (Griffiths, 1995)	Progressive (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007)	Participatory art programme (Binns, 2005)

Competitive-led approach to culture-led regeneration and its strategies

In a competitive approach to culture-led regeneration, arts and culture are emblematic of neoliberal sovereignty (Grodach, 2017). It has been termed “city boosterism” by Griffiths (1995) and “consumerist model” by Bianchini (1989) to highlight the primary focus of these strategies on economic, market-oriented, and consumer-oriented goals. The competitive approach to culture-led regeneration emphasises the arts of consumption and aims to create and promote an appealing image for specific communities who are mainly tourists, business representatives, investors, and affluent residents (Griffiths, 1995; Bianchini & Parkinson, 1994; Binns, 2005). The “creative class” cultural development strategy is closely associated with this approach (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007, p. 353). The concept of the creative class suggests that cities and countries should prioritise quality-of-life amenities, including consumption opportunities (e.g., high-quality cultural facilities and amenities), to attract creative professionals and practitioners. In return, it is believed that the presence of creative professionals and practitioners in the cities can be influential in bringing about direct economic benefits (Florida, 2002).

In this approach, the conceptualisation of culture and art is narrow and limited to consumer goods. The main focus is on creating visually appealing designs and physical modifications with a degree of stability in the form of prominent buildings, facilities, and public spaces incorporating cultural services and use (McCarthy, 2005; Vickery, 2007). This view is rarely affected by the cities’ and citizens’ real needs. Success is often measured by how the use of culture responds to economic criteria (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). However, city authorities and policymakers often assume that economic success can, in turn, facilitate socio-cultural development (Vickery, 2007). Large-scale cultural events such as the EXPOs, Olympic Games, and European Capital of Culture, often accompanied by splendid architectural manifestations, are some of examples of this approach (Riza, 2015, p. 270; Richards & Wilson, 2006; Jones & Evans, 2008). The creation of thematic “hyper-real” environments and the development of “Disney Culture,” to bring about enjoyable, memorable, and unique experiences for visitors, is also one of the related strategies (Ghahremani et al., 2021; Smith, 2006; Rojek, 1993; Richards & Wilson, 2006).

In the competitive-led approach, city governments usually direct development through top-down processes, and often communities do not have participation opportunities (Park, 2016). This approach is typically adopted by city authorities aiming to enhance national and international competitiveness on a city-wide scale. Thus, we can infer that this approach might overlook some of the local complexities of social processes and contextual particularities. In this

regard, institutional support or stakeholder buy-in is crucial to reduce exclusion, eliminate barriers, and facilitate sustained stakeholder interaction (Furtado et al., 2022). According to the literature, the geographic focus of this approach is primarily on city centres and “prime city areas” (Vickery, 2007; Griffiths, 1995; Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007, p.353).

Creative-led approach to culture-led regeneration and its strategies

In this approach, the role of the creative activities, particularly the production activities, is encouraged. Cultural and creative industries have been perceived to be an integral part of culture-led regeneration and are sought, motivated, and adopted by many cities to revitalise urban declines and pursue societal and economic betterment (Gentle & McGuirk, 2018; Della Lucia & Franch, 2015; Evans, 2009; Sepe, 2013). Here, culture is applied more widely and at a level higher than high art. The emphasis is on job creation, employment, and the production of cultural products as a necessary form of value creation (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Griffiths, 1995). Cultural producers and artists are key stakeholders in this approach and are involved in culture-led regeneration processes through a mixture of top-down and bottom-up processes (Durmaz, 2015).

In this approach, underused old buildings, former industrial premises, and heritage-built forms often present a considerable spatial opportunity for creative production (Armondi & Bruzzese, 2017). Instead of demolishing and replacing, pioneering artists and cultural producers sought to renovate and refurbish blighted and underused old buildings. These buildings are believed to have the “natural advantages” of being adaptable to the new physical space provisions, often providing low rents based on their obsolescence and dilapidation, and have the creative atmosphere to attract creative workers and artists (He & Gebhardt, 2014, p. 2354). In this regard, enacting particular policies such as tax and zoning laws to attract artistic investments and allocating spaces and historic buildings to creative groups can advocate a creative-led approach to culture-led regeneration (Binns, 2005; Zukin, 2011; McCarthy, 2005; Florida, 2002; Evans et al., 2004). Many studies have highlighted the importance of social networking and interaction between creative groups. The importance of social networking lies in the nature of creative activities that usually extends beyond workplaces. Cultural producers benefit socially and economically from formal/ informal contacts and encounters in public and semi-public spaces like cafés and restaurants (Durmaz, 2015; Currid, 2007). Another strategy used in culture-led regeneration projects is providing public art that creates employment opportunities for local artists and significantly influences the promotion of urban areas as creative quarters (McCarthy, 2005).

While this approach has no specific spatial focus (Griffiths, 1995), cultural clusters, characterised by a spatial concentration of creative production activities, serve as an example. Case studies of SoHo in Lower Manhattan, as the centre of film and media-related activities (Durmaz, 2015), and Northern Quarter in Manchester as the home to fashion design (Wansborough & Mageean, 2000) are among well-known international examples of cultural/creative districts which have realised the potential of cultural and creative production in urban regeneration.

Community-led approach to culture-led regeneration and its strategies

The goal of the community-based approach is to revive local identity, arouse higher expectations of urban life standards, and create a democratic public realm. In this approach, arts and culture can extend social relationships, improve personal skills, strengthen local identity, contribute to the equitable distribution of benefits, and encourage public participation (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Griffiths, 1995; Vickery, 2007; Binns, 2005). Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris (2007) referred to this approach as “progressive strategies” which sought to “widen access to and participation in the arts, support local cultural production and utilise the arts to strengthen community identity and to revitalise disadvantaged neighbourhoods” (p.355). Here, culture embraces a wide range of meanings and integrate different dimensions of life, including education, health, and living environment.

Compared to a competitive-led approach, an essential aspect of a community-led approach is to grant agency and power to local communities (Afsari Bajestani et al., 2022). Ensuring the participation of diverse voices is of great importance to acknowledge “people’s ‘right to the city’ which is to say their right to local citizenship” (Lefebvre, 1996 Cited in Friedmann, 2010, p. 159). In this approach, city governments may act as an indirect supporter or as Park (2016, p.7) referred to them, as “patrons” for providing funds behind the scenes.

To pursue community objectives, it is essential to acknowledge unique cultural resources and mobilise local processes (Bobadilla et al., 2019; Lin & Hsing, 2009). Focusing on a historical quarter in Taiwan, Lin and Hsing (2009) demonstrated how local community capacities are integrated into heritage renovation and folk cultural activities. Bobadilla, Goransson, and Pichault (2019) observed how a cultural street performance in Belgium facilitated mobilising the community and recovering people’s perceptions and pride in their skills and competencies. Endogenous festivals linked with local cultural context can significantly contribute to the community’s vitality, regenerate social and cultural meanings, and give “opportunities to experience the city as a participant” due to being linked with tangible and significant cultural features of the place (Riza, 2015, p. 270; Lin & Hsing, 2009).

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for culture-led regeneration, with its three main approaches and the spatial strategies associated with each approach. Following Griffiths's argument (1995), we believe that analytically distinguishing between different approaches to culture-led regeneration does not imply that, in reality, these approaches are practised exclusively. Culture-led regeneration can integrate a combination of these approaches depending on various contextual and site-specific factors. For instance, the current and desired status of cities within the regional and international urban hierarchy and the cities' existing cultural and creative dynamics, financial resources, and governance structures determine the type of culture-led regeneration pursued in specific locations (Griffiths, 1995).

As indicated in the literature, we have identified a range of spatial strategies that align more closely with each approach—13 strategies. In the later stages of this study, these spatial strategies were used to propose an alternative model of culture-led regeneration in our case study. According to the literature, competitive-led approaches align with five strategies: image creation or enhancement (thematization); development of consumption-based activities; design of flagship cultural buildings; development of international and large-scale events; and engineering of innovative structures.

Four spatial strategies are more closely associated with the creative-led approach: providing affordable and workable art spaces to empower local artists; developing public art schemes; developing creative and cultural industries; and developing spaces for social interaction and networking.

The community-led approach can be categorised into four strategies. These strategies include enhancing intangible local heritage through local cultural events; increasing cultural land uses and facilities for local communities; improving the quality of public spaces; and revitalisation of historical and old buildings as community spaces (tangible local heritage).

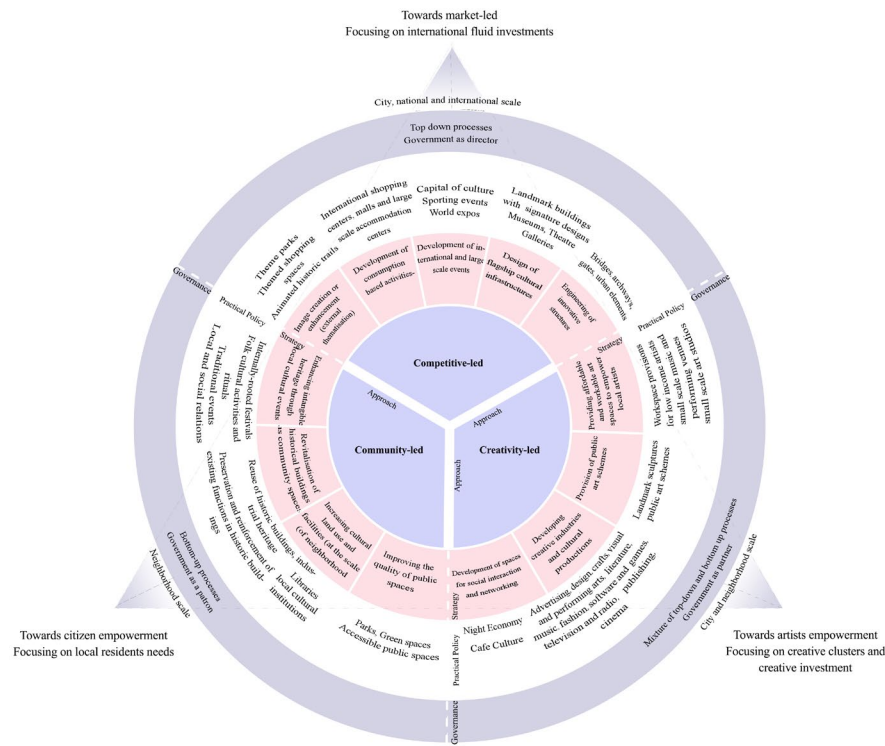


Figure 1. Culture-led regeneration conceptual framework including different approaches and strategies

Methodology

To investigate how culture has been integrated into the regeneration of cultural and historical districts in Mashhad and propose an alternative model of culture-led regeneration, this study adopts a case study methodology with a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. A case study method is well suited to exploring “how” questions when researchers lack control over events and are investigating a contemporary complex phenomenon in a real-world context (Yin, 2014, p.9). We chose Zone 1 of the 8th District of Mashhad for our case study because of its role in the city’s local and cultural identity, its high number of preserved historical and cultural sites, and the current development plans claiming to preserve culture in the area’s urban regeneration.

To examine how culture has been integrated into the area’s regeneration, we drew on data from various sources, including reviewing the area’s official plan

documents, field observation, and analysing secondary documents including online news sites, and websites. The first author also attended several consultation sessions held in the area. We qualitatively analysed the interventions in the selected area, drawing on the theoretical review of culture-led regeneration developed in the previous section. Mashhad Central Area's Detailed Plan, provided by Tash Consultancy and approved in 2002, is the main operative plan for the area that guides urban regeneration initiatives. We reviewed this document to learn about how the Detailed plan envisages the role of culture in the area's regeneration. Analysing secondary documents, field observation and attending consultation sessions helped us to examine how culture has been integrated into urban development practices.

To propose a preliminary culture-led regeneration model for this area, we drew on the conceptual framework provided in this study (Figure 1). For this step, we conducted a Delphi technique which is well suited for soliciting expert opinions, building consensus, and raising accuracy using multiple iterations to collect data (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). In this study, the main aim of using the Delphi technique was to select suitable approaches and strategies related to the area's culture-led regeneration and to weigh and prioritise these selections.

Using the snowball sampling technique, we approached experts who were either active researchers in historical and heritage fabrics or were managers with considerable knowledge about the culture and history of Mashhad, especially about the area under study. Fourteen experts agreed to participate in this study: two urban managers from the Department of Planning and Architecture in Roads and Urban Development Office of Khorasan Razavi and Khorasan Razavi Provincial Government; three urban-related practitioners from Mashhad Municipality; six academic scholars with expertise in urban developments; one Khorasan historian and two urban sociologists. We tried to involve panellists with diverse expertise, ensuring reliable and holistic analysis (Musa et al., 2005). However, it should also be noted that residents' perspectives which can provide valuable insights for culture-led regeneration were not investigated but could be considered in future research.

We employed a two-step process for the Delphi technique. In the questionnaires, first, we asked experts to assess the relative applicability of each strategy of culture-led regeneration using a five-grade Likert scale. Second, we asked experts to assess the importance of each strategy by ranking them. The ranking enables urban planners and decision-makers to better understand the relative importance of strategies to the success of culture-led regeneration and thus enhance the execution efficiency of culture-led regeneration projects (e.g., resource allocation) and high-quality policy making. We developed the questionnaires based on the 13 strategies identified in the culture-led regeneration framework. To ensure the

questionnaire's validity, prior to seeking expert opinions, we tested and refined questions by seeking feedback from three academics well-versed in urban regeneration topics. Additionally, to enhance clarity and relevance, the first author organised in-person meetings with several participants (seven participants) when they were completing the questionnaires to reduce ambiguity. Also, every questionnaire provided a summary of different approaches to culture-led regeneration and the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

Concerning data analysis for the Delphi technique, descriptive measures, including median, mean, and cumulative frequency, were employed for the first step of the Delphi technique. For this study, the criterion for agreement on each question was a median value of ≥ 3 and an interquartile range of ≤ 1 . In the second step, the Kendall coefficient was calculated. With the Kendall coefficient of 0.65, indicating a medium level of agreement, we conducted another round of the Delphi technique. Experts were provided with the previous round's median scores while answering the same questionnaire. In this round, the Kendall coefficient increased to 0.7, signifying agreement was achieved. We assessed the reliability of the experts' rankings between the two rounds of Delphi by the Spearman ranking coefficient. A coefficient higher than 0.9 signifies acceptable reliability (Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Giannarou & Zervas, 2014). The coefficient in this study was 0.909, which indicates high reliability. For the data analysis for these two steps, we utilised SPSS software.

The case study of a cultural and creative district in Mashhad, Iran: A snapshot

Located in the northeast of Iran, the city of Mashhad is the capital of Khorasan-e Razavi province. It was founded in 818 A.D. when Imam Reza, the eighth Imam of Shi'ites—who was residing in one of the main villages of the region—was martyred and buried there. This event led to the establishment of Mashhad, meaning the place of martyrdom, as the area houses the tomb of Imam Reza. Since then, the area has gradually gained importance as a cultural and religious place and steadily grew in size and population. With a population of over 3 million people (Census, 2016), Mashhad is the second largest metropolitan city after the capital of Iran, Tehran. Annually, over 30 million tourists and pilgrims visit the city (Talebian & Riza, 2020).



Figure 2. 2.1: Location of Khorasan Razavi in Iran; 2.2: Location of the historical, cultural, and religious cores and other CBDs across the city; 2.3: Location of the holy shrine, central zone, and Samen district; 2.4: The study's selected area

In the southeastern part of Mashhad, the central and historical core of the city is located (Figure 2- 2.2). This central core boasts a rich set of historical and socio-cultural legacy and significant built heritage, demonstrating socio-spatial transformations throughout history. According to official planning documents, this area is divided into two parts: one is the Samen district, closely surrounding the holy shrine, and the other one is the central zone of Mashhad (Figure 2- 2.3). As per Mashhad's Master Plan, both Samen district and Mashhad's central zone are considered centres of history, culture, and religion, contributing significantly to the city's quest for a prominent status among Islamic countries (Mehrazan Consulting Engineering, 1993). Dreaming of playing an international role in the

Islamic world, the city has undergone massive renewal plans, especially in the Samen district, in pursuit of a competitive advantage (Ghahremani & Hashemi, 2018; Ghahremani & Afsari Bajestani, 2018).

The selected area for this study is located within Mashhad's central zone, officially recognised as Zone 1 of the 8th District of Mashhad (Figure 2- 2.3). Covering 198 hectares, this area holds significant cultural and historical importance. Its history dates back to 1600 A.D. when the second defensive wall of the city was constructed during the Safavid dynasty, marking the official inclusion of this area within the city's boundaries (Ghahremani, 2010). During the Ghajar dynasty (18th and 19th century), the area's citadel underwent renovation and development, witnessing the construction of government and military buildings and housing of affluent and knowledgeable residents (Saeedi Rezvani & Edalati Bazzaz, 2009). In the 20th century, with the advent of modernisation during the Pahlavi period, the area became the symbol of modernism and contemporaneity. Many significant urban organisations such as banks and post offices, as well as the most prestigious activities, such as cinemas, theatres, European-style cafés, jewellers, textile shops, home appliance shops, bookstores, cafes, and libraries, emerged in the area (Darwent, 1965). Bridging Mashhad's historical legacy with its modern developments, this area earned a distinct cultural reputation and a high social and economic profile (Ghahremani, 2010).

From the late 1960s and particularly after the Islamic revolution in the 1980s and the following socio-political transformations, the area's creative and cultural activities, particularly in the field of cinema, theatres, and performing arts, began to wane (Saeedi Rezvani & Edalati Bazzaz, 2009). Simultaneously, the area suffered from social and economic degradation. The decline was further exacerbated by the rapid and massive growth and development of new urban centres, especially on the northwest axis (Figure 2-2.2), and the relocation of business and administrative functions to other parts of the city (Ghahremani, 2010).

Nowadays, the area retains its significance in two aspects: 1) as an institutional area, hosting the city's significant official buildings (e.g., Tax administration of Khorasan Razavi or Red Crescent of Khorasan Razavi) (Figure 4) and consulates of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan, and 2) as a memorable part of the physical-semiotic skeleton of Mashhad by holding remarkable tangible cultural heritage (Figure 3). The area holds one of the city's highest cultural land uses and facilities. Currently, 6071 m² of the area is devoted to religious activities and 19105 m² to cultural activities (Figure 3). Also, the area houses numerous historical buildings and few of them have been listed on Iran's National Heritage List (NHL).

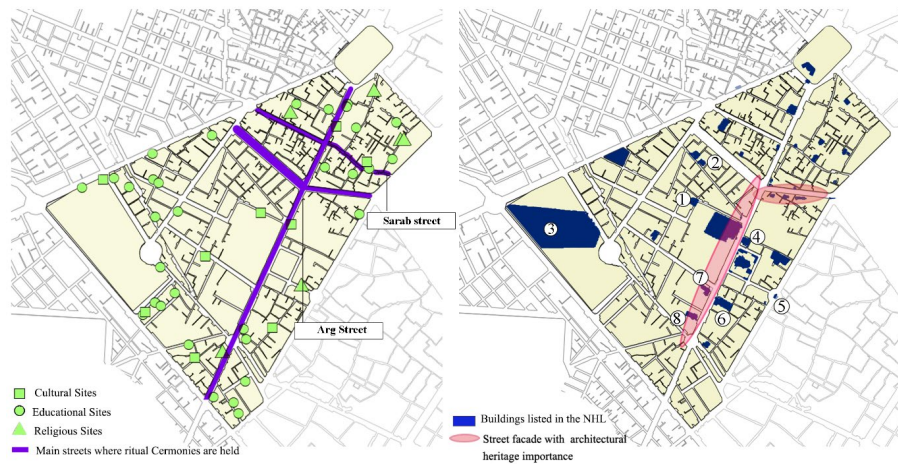


Figure 3- The location of cultural assets in the present Source: the authors' observations of the site and Iran's National Heritage List

Results

Review of the current urban regeneration initiatives taking place in the area

While the Detailed Plan for Mashhad's Central Area does not explicitly mention culture-led regeneration, one of its primary goals is to preserve and enhance valuable historical and cultural elements of the area. The Detailed Plan acknowledges the historical layers within the area, emphasising the opportunity to revitalise local identity through the revival of memories and mental images (Tash, 2011). This objective is defined alongside other goals, including responding to citizens' and pilgrims' needs, improving accessibility through sustainable public transport, and upgrading the area's current functions and infrastructure (Tash, 2011).

The predominant approach to incorporating culture in the area's regeneration plans revolves around safeguarding singular historic buildings listed on Iran's NHL amid development projects. Currently, 30 significant heritage buildings in the area are inscribed on the NHL, and Tash Consultancy has designated them in the Detailed Plan. Per the Cultural Heritage Organisation (CHO) rules and regulations, any physical and functional interventions that might damage these monuments are prohibited on-site (Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation of Iran, 1988). Additionally, construction within their protected

buffer zones is only permitted under the supervision of CHO (Chizfahm Daneshmandian, et. 2020; Moradi, et.al., 2014).



Figure 4. Some of the heritage buildings in the area Source: the authors' field observation and official documents

Some of the listed heritage buildings have been repurposed for local and tourism-related activities. For example, the Pars Building was transformed into a hotel, the Behesht Building was converted into a cultural centre, and the Malek Building was utilised as a museum (see Figure 4). However, many have been left vacant for years, pleading for conservation and restoration (see Figure 5). Several barriers hinder the restoration of these buildings, including budget shortfalls and the inefficiency of incentive programs to attract private investors. Additionally, there is a lack of clear mechanisms for engaging the local communities, who own these properties¹. The absence of proper maintenance has resulted in significant degradation, and, in some cases, the buildings are being used for activities associated with social disorder, such as meeting and resting spots for drug addicts.



Figure 5. examples of NHL houses on Sar'ab Street that experience significant degradation due to the lack of proper maintenance (Source: Faeze Farhadi Public Instagram Page)

Apart from the NHL buildings, numerous old buildings with historical and architectural significance lack legal protection against development proposals.

Due to the area's proximity to the holy shrine, its central location, and historical significance (Figure 2), development plans are influenced by the rapid increase in the number of pilgrims, the high value of lands and properties, and the pressures that the city faces in its pursuit of achieving an international cultural-religious status within the Islamic world (Tash, 2011; Ghahremani & Hashemi, 2018). As a result, one of the primary aspects of the Detailed Plan is the substantial surge in commercial and accommodation land uses, leading to the destruction of old buildings (those not listed in the NHL) and the emergence of high-rise buildings that often disregard historical and cultural values.

The architecture of newly-built buildings aspires to be contradictory and avant-garde, as in the first movers of culture-led regeneration (Gospodini, 2001). However, these are typical large-scale developments abundant in different parts of the city (Figure 6). Consequently, many urban scholars and the public have criticised the newly constructed projects for failing to retain the historic character of the fabric in terms of architecture, massing, scale, pattern, and materials (Ghahremani, 2010; Saeedi Rezvani & Edalati Bazzaz, 2009). As a result, new developments have fallen short of preserving and ensuring the continuity of historical identity, which was one of the objectives of Tash's plan.



Figure 6. Mega-scale buildings. Source: the authors' field observation and official documents

In late 2006, an urban design project was ratified in the area's Detailed Plan, focusing on regenerating a historical street (Tash, 2011). The project specifically targeted Sar'ab² Street (Figures 2 & 3), recognised as the most intact historic street that has remained after the 1900s period³. The street is now renowned for housing historical buildings and monuments, a bustling marketplace creating and selling woodworking, architectural and painting tools, print shops, traditional eateries, and educational and medical institutions. According to the Detailed Plan, a restoration and rehabilitation plan was provided for Sar'ab Street in 2019 which was executed in 2020. This project involved replacing asphalt with new pavements, designing communal spaces, installing sidewalk plantings, street furniture and traffic signs, and upgrading infrastructure (e.g., runoff water collection system). However, the rehabilitation did not extend to conserving and reactivating historical buildings (Figure 5), establishing specific regulations for new constructions to

maintain the historic character, restoring historical facades, and empowering existing residents and businesses. In July 2019, the first author attended some of the consultation meetings with residents and business owners of the street. Business owners expressed concerns about the lack of clarity in the Detailed Plan regarding the proposed development. For example, there were concerns over some of the uncertainties in the Detailed Plan, notably regarding whether the street would be widened—an aspect influencing the land owners' decision not to restore their building's facades⁴. Additionally, they raised concerns about the lack of participation and engagement opportunities. Business owners complained that they were not approached for the primary principles of the proposal; instead, they were approached regarding the final stages of the plan (e.g., selection of pavement materials). Furthermore, they were worried about the potential rent rise due to the project, which could result in the displacement of long-standing businesses (based on the consultation meeting held in July 2019).

In 2014, the national strategic document on Revitalising, Upgrading, Renovating, and Enabling Deteriorated and Underutilised Urban Fabrics was ratified. This document mandated provinces to establish a regeneration organisation within their region to ensure sustainable regeneration of urban areas and neighbourhoods to enhance living quality, protect citizen's rights and restore urban identity (MRUD, 2014). Following this mandate, a regeneration office was established in the neighbourhood of Arg (Figures 2 & 3) and Tash Consultancy developed an urban design plan in 2020 focusing on regenerating Arg Street based on historical principles. Although this project has not yet been implemented and no written official documents are available, the review of secondary documents shows that most of the defined projects have emphasised the physical restoration of historical facades, especially those of NHI buildings⁵. The local regeneration office plays an essential role in negotiating restoration with private property owners to reduce implementation barriers⁶. However, Arg Street's regeneration, similar to Sar'ab, focuses more on preserving individual valuable parcels rather than embracing an integrated perspective on incorporating culture into urban regeneration.

We can also observe changes in the area's cultural and creative uses, closely related to how culture has been conceived in current development initiatives. As mentioned earlier, cultural and creative activities such as cinemas, theatres, performing arts, literary cafes, and bookstores had a strong presence in the area. For instance, 10 cinemas were located on Arg Street (Fig. 5). However, from the late 1960s and particularly after the Islamic revolution (during the 1980s) and the following socio-political transformations, creative and cultural activities of the area, particularly in the field of cinema, theatres, and performing arts lost their dominance (Saeedi Rezvani & Edalati Bazzaz, 2009). Despite this decline, some

of these buildings remain physically present, either being used for other activities or being left vacant. They still hold strong associations with people's mental image, remaining indispensable components of the area's and the city's semiotic skeleton (Figure 7) (Ghahremani, 2010).

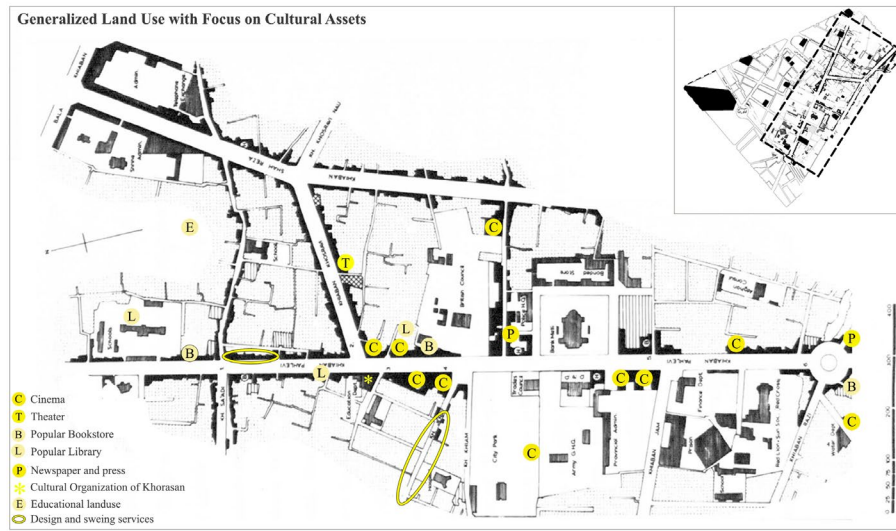


Figure 7. Location of the selected area in historical maps and its cultural assets—these buildings have either been repurposed for other activities, left vacant, or demolished
Source: Adapted from Darwent (1965)

The Detailed Plan has not designated many of these places (e.g., remaining cinemas) on the area's skeleton map as cultural and identity elements, nor have they been listed on Iran's national heritage list. Several cinemas (e.g., Crystal and Dideban) have been demolished and replaced by new developments. Others have remained vacant for years, leading to further degradation, or have been occupied by other activities and general services; for instance, the Moulin Rouge Cinema has been converted into a warehouse, and the Ferdowsi Cinema has become a tailor shop (Towfighi, 2015). Only a few, such as the plots where Asia and Ghods Cinemas are situated, have been labelled as arts and cultural land use in the proposed land use map.

However, even if land has been designated for arts and cultural purposes or if a cinema has been active until recent years, there is no guarantee that the area can withstand development pressures. This is evident in the fate of the two Asia and Ghods Cinemas. In 2021, these two cinemas were suddenly demolished without consultation or prior notice to the public, and they were sold to the private

commercial sector. Such land use conversion is an example of industrial-to-industrial gentrification, often occurring in cultural and creative quarters (Pratt, 2011). The demolition of cinemas in this area has sparked numerous complaints from Mashhad's residents, cultural enthusiasts, actors, and artists across Iran⁷. The media covered this loss of local cultural identity and destruction of people's collective memory with headlines such as: "Mashhad, the city of ruined cinemas," "the ruined citadel of Mashhad's cinemas," "the cinemas that get demolished and the memories that get knocked down,"¹⁰ "Mashhad [50 years ago] with a population of 250000 and 20 cinemas, and Mashhad of 3 million [in 2023] with only five cinemas"¹¹.

Finally, the significant increase in commercial and accommodation land uses, as proposed in the Detailed Plan, has adversely affected the stability of cultural and social particularities. For example, it has contributed to a decrease in the number of permanent residents previously residing in the area. The annual population growth rate for the selected area was -3.06% between 2011 and 2016 (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2011, 2016). This decline in the permanent resident population was also highlighted in the monitoring report of the Detailed Plan conducted by Tash Consultancy in 2011 (Tash, 2011). This reduction is incongruent with the plan's intended objectives, which aimed to increase the residential density (the number of people per square kilometre), and, thus, contradicts the plan's goals of enhancing the area's liveability, safety, social surveillance and overall quality of residential zones (Tash, 2011). Such migration of population alludes to the gentrification issues that have become part-and-parcel of regeneration debates (Pratt, 2011), especially in the absence of robust protection mechanisms such as anti-displacement protections for existing communities (Davis, 2021).

Proposing an alternative model of culture-led regeneration of the case study

As described in the methodology, a three-round Delphi survey was employed to apply the conceptual framework to the area and propose an alternative model of culture-led regeneration. The first step aimed to define the relative applicability of each culture-led regeneration strategy (CRS). The participants were asked how they would rate the applicability of each strategy in the success of the districts' culture-led regeneration. The results show that the "development of consumption-based activities" (CRS2) with a median of 1.79 and a mean of 2 is not applicable (Table 2), and we decided to remove this strategy. We chose not to exclude strategies with a median of three. These strategies were mainly related to the competitive-led approach (CRS1, CRS3, CRS4, CRS5). The median of three showed that these strategies, on average, can still contribute to the area's

culture-led regeneration. This is primarily due to the case study's location close to the holy shrine, which results in the high value of properties, significant investors' interest in the site, and the local government's desire to create an attractive image for tourists and pilgrims.

Table 2- Results of the first round of the Delphi Survey

	N		Mean	Median	Interquartile Range	Percentiles	
	Valid	Missing				25	50
1st Delphi Round							
CRS1. Image creation or enhancement (thematization) ^a	14	0	3.64	4.00	1	3.00	4.00
CRS2. Development of consumption-based activities	14	0	1.79	2.00	1	1.00	2.00
CRS3. Design of flagship cultural infrastructures	14	0	3.21	3.00	1	3.00	3.00
CRS4. Development of international and large-scale cultural events	14	0	3.64	4.00	1	3.00	4.00
CRS5. Engineering of innovative structures	14	0	3.14	3.00	0	3.00	3.00
CRS6. Providing affordable and workable art spaces to empower local artists	14	0	4.07	4.00	0	4.00	4.00
CRS7. Provision of public art schemes	14	0	4.36	4.00	1	4.00	4.00
CRS8. Developing creative industries and cultural productions	14	0	4.21	4.00	0	4.00	4.00
CRS9. Development of spaces for social interaction and networking	14	0	3.93	4.00	1	3.75	4.00
CRS10. Improving the quality of public spaces	14	0	4.29	4.00	1	4.00	4.00
CRS11. Increasing cultural land uses and facilities (at the scale of neighbourhood)	14	0	4.29	4.00	1	4.00	4.00
CRS12. Revitalisation of historical and old buildings as community spaces (tangible local heritage).	14	0	4.93	5.00	0	5.00	5.00
CRS13. Enhancing intangible local heritage through local cultural events	14	0	4.57	5.00	1	4.00	5.00

^a Question Asked: How would you rate the applicability of image creation or enhancement (thematization) strategies, such as building theme parks and spaces, to the success of the district's culture-led regeneration project?

The second part of Delphi aimed to prepare a hierarchy of strategies. The hierarchy of strategies allows urban planners and decision-makers to prioritise the application of resources in culture-led regeneration. For this purpose, the Kendall coefficient was utilised. The panel members were asked to rank the 12 strategies from 1 to 12 in descending order of importance. As explained in the methodology, the Delphi technique was repeated for another round to ensure an agreement among experts (Table 3). The reliability of the experts' ranking between the two rounds of Delphi was measured by the Spearman ranking coefficient (Table 4). The descending order of strategies is depicted in the following table.

Table 3 - Ranking order of strategies based on the second and third rounds of the Delphi Survey

Strategies	Mean Rank	
	2nd Delphi Round	3rd Delphi Round
CRS12. Revitalisation of historical and old buildings as community spaces (tangible local heritage).	1.83	1.25
CRS13. Enhancing intangible local heritage through local cultural events	3.33	1.83
CRS11. Increasing cultural land uses and facilities (at the scale of neighbourhood)	3.58	4.17
CRS10. Improving the quality of public spaces	4.79	4.58
CRS6. Providing affordable and workable art spaces to empower local artists	5.67	6.08
CRS9. Development of spaces for social interaction and networking	6.33	6.25
CRS7. Provision of public art schemes	6.88	7.17
CRS8. Developing creative industries and cultural productions	7.08	7.42
CRS4. Development of international and large-scale events	8.04	7.75
CRS1. Image creation or enhancement (thematization)	8.29	9.75
CRS5. Engineering of Innovative structures	10.50	10.75
CRS3. Design of flagship cultural infrastructures	11.67	11.00
<i>N</i>	12	12
<i>Kendall's W*</i>	.650	.772
<i>Chi-Square</i>	85.758	101.923
<i>df</i>	11	11
<i>Asymp. Sig.</i>	.000	.000

Table 4- Reliability of Experts' ranking

		Correlations	
		1nd kendal	2nd kendal
Spearman's rho	1st Kendal	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		<i>N</i>	12
	2nd Kendal	Correlation Coefficient	.909**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		<i>N</i>	12

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 8 shows a radar representation of the spatial strategies and the degree to which they cover various domains of culture-led regeneration approaches. According to experts, the community-led approach is more likely to be the most effective approach in the culture-led regeneration of the area. This is mainly due to the high priority of four related strategies: “Enhancing intangible local heritage through local cultural events “(CRS12), “Revitalisation of historical and old buildings as community spaces (tangible local heritage)” (CRS13), “Increasing cultural land uses and facilities (at the scale of the neighbourhood)” (CRS11), and “Improving the quality of public spaces” (CRS10). The overall status of the creative-led approach was significantly higher than the competitive-led

strategies, given the artistic and cultural activities of the past and present. The competitive-led approach has the lowest priority, but it can still have contributions to the culture-led regeneration process, specifically in terms of “Image creation or enhancement (thematization)” (CRS1) and “Development of international and large-scale cultural events” (CRS4). The lower priority of the competitive-led approach contrasts with current interventions taking place in Mashhad, where the fabric’s cultural resources and historical identity are destroyed under the guise of urban renewal.

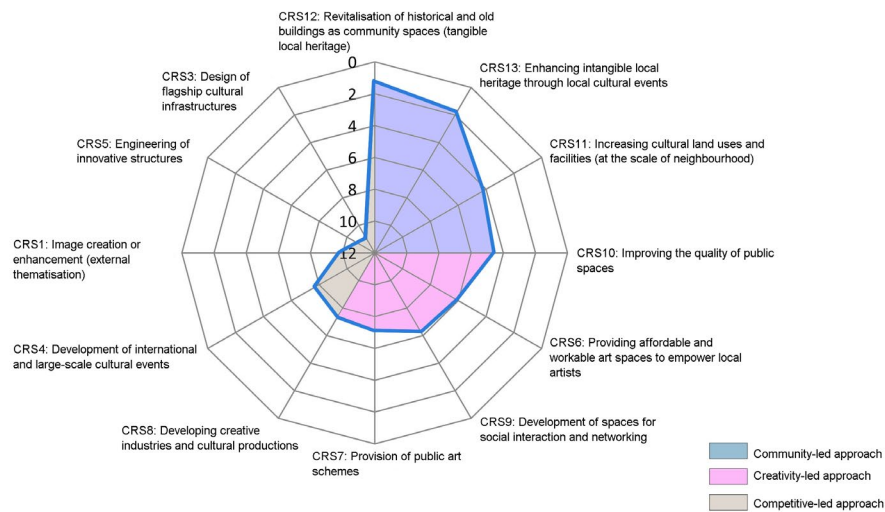


Figure 8. Radar representation of the priority of the culture-led regeneration strategies indicating different approaches

The prioritised strategies can provide a helpful guideline for designing the area based on culture-led regeneration. Figure 9 shows a conceptual design for the area based on the prioritised strategies (derived from the Delphi process). We translated these strategies into various policies compatible with the area’s context.

For instance, according to experts, taking advantage of tangible cultural resources (CRS12) was the most effective strategy in culture-led regeneration. This strategy can be translated into the following policies: reusing historic buildings as local cultural centres at a neighbourhood scale; using historical buildings to reinforce legibility; using historical buildings as communal spaces and venues for public matters related to the daily life of local communities, and defining neighbourhood units with the centre of historic houses as the community centres. Other related policies to community-led approach and strategies can be organising

an integrated series of participatory events to foster community mobilisation and to hold Mashhad's traditions¹² (Lin & Hsing, 2009), increasing local cultural land use and facilities to reinforce the area's cultural identity (CRS 11), enhancing the quality of public spaces, and redefining pedestrian-friendly spaces (CRS 10) (see Figure 9). Such policies can enhance the quality of space for local communities, especially as the area is experiencing functional and physical degradation.

The community-led strategies are followed by creative-led strategies (Figure 8). They reflect the importance of cultural and creative industries, which once had a powerful role in the liveability of the area. These industries can be restored to strengthen the cultural identity of the place. The middle zone of the district around Arg Street (Figures 2, 3, & 9) can better accommodate the creative functions due to the high concentration of cultural assets such as old buildings of cinemas and museums as well as the presence of Bagh Meli and Jannat Pedestrian Avenue. Some of the policies related to creative-led strategies are enacting specific incentives to attract artistic entrepreneurs and cultural and creative industries, converting idle and abandoned spaces to creative workshops (CRS6 and CRS8), designing third spaces (e.g., meeting spaces, traditional cafes, teahouses, etc.) to promote social interaction and foster social networks (CRS9) deemed necessary for sustaining creative dynamics (Stevens, 2015), and encouraging and supporting public art activities in urban spaces.

The following strategies concern the competitive-led approach and are associated with lower priority values. As with other strategies, critical consideration of socio-spatial context and place-specific features is required to increase their effectiveness. However, according to the low priority of the competitive-led approach, investments in these strategies could be postponed until other strategies with higher importance have been implemented. Per Figure 9, some of the suggested policies include organising international events relevant to Imam Reza and Khorasan culture (CRS4), creating themed spaces based on existing cultural features in the area (CRS1), and designing new cultural complexes at the city scale based on the existing contextual and architectural patterns.

Conceptual design	Approach and strategy (With priority order)	Policy
	<p>Community-led approach:</p> <p>CBS12: Revitalisation of historical and old buildings as community spaces (tangible local heritage) CBS13: Enhancing intangible local heritage through local cultural events. CBS11: Increasing cultural land uses and facilities (at the scale of the neighbourhood) CBS10: Improving the quality of public spaces</p> <p>Creative-led approach:</p> <p>CBS6: Providing affordable and workable art spaces to empower local artists CBS9: Development of spaces for social interaction and networking CBS7: Provision of public art schemes CBS8: Developing creative industries and cultural production</p> <p>Competitive-led approach:</p> <p>CBS4: Organising international and large-scale events CBS1: Image creation or enhancement (thematization) CBS5: Engineering of innovative structures CBS3: Design of flagship cultural infrastructures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reusing historic buildings as local cultural centres (compatible and complementary land uses) • Making use of open spaces, valuable buildings • and existing layout to reinforce legibility elements • Defining neighbourhood unit with the centre of historic houses • Using historical architectural patterns for new developments • Organising traditional events e.g., Samanoopazai • Holding events in public spaces such as Iranian story-telling and performance traditions such as Ta'zieh • Reusing abandoned cinemas and theatres to hold local ritual and cultural performances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising temporary bazaars for Khorasan handicrafts in linear green spaces (handwoven Kilim and Iranian rug) • Using video mapping to project ritual ceremonies such as Naqqali on to the sides of historic buildings • Development of a functional path related to publishing • Using public art in urban spaces and on solid facades • Specific Lightning design for urban landmarks • Adopting encouraging policies to attract artistic investments such as the allocation of abandoned spaces to art workshops with low rent • Allocating historical buildings to Khorasan rituals and art performances • Creating open-space restaurants for traditional Khorasan food • Converting historical buildings to traditional hotels, teahouse, café, "Zookhaneh" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a Turkmenistan cultural garden in the Turkmenistan embassy • Creating art and literary garden (Khorasan significant Iranian literary figures and artists and myth) • Creating reading Gardens • Creating a healing garden in the green space of Imam Reza Hospital • Organising international events relevant to Imam Reza, capitals of Islamic culture, historical fabrics, Khorasan culture (Khorasan local music, Khorasan local dance) • Designing a cultural complex with respect to the historical fabric • Symbolic Redefining of towers and gates to associate with identity

Figure 9. Culture-led urban design framework for the historic-cultural district of Mashhad

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aligns with the recognised importance of culture-led regeneration in historical and cultural districts of Iran (Ebrahimi Gorbani, et al., 2021; Pourzakarya & Fadaie Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2020; Lak et al., 2020; Ranjbar & Afsari Bajestani, 2017). Through a comprehensive literature review, we presented a conceptual framework for culture-led regeneration, encompassing three main approaches: competitive-led, community-led, and creative-led approaches, along with their spatial strategies. We then analysed how culture has been employed in the regeneration of Zone 1 within the 8th district of Mashhad and explored an alternative model for culture-led regeneration. The alternative model was developed based on assessing the applicability and significance of culture-led regeneration approaches and their spatial strategies. The case study provides enlightening insights, as it grapples with balancing the promotion and preservation of cultural features with the profit-driven activities induced by the strategic location of the area next to the holy shrine and the high real-estate value of land.

The results of this study reveal that the current urban regeneration initiatives in the case study prefer cultural development strategies that are aligned with economic, market-oriented, and consumer-oriented goals. The predominant approach, as observed in the Detailed Plan and the practice, involves preserving and protecting “singular” valuable parcels amid the massive introduction of higher-density residential, commercial and accommodation uses. This occasional consideration of culture and the demand for flagship commercial and accommodation buildings are closely related to the instrumentalisation of culture in favour of maximum economic profits, with hopes to enhance the city’s presence on the national and international stages (Ghahremani & Hashemi, 2018; Ghahremani & Afsari Bajestani, 2018). This approach partly resembles the competitive-led approach to culture-led regeneration, which focuses on promoting an attractive image for tourists, pilgrims, and private investors and businesses (Park, 2016; Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). However, the singular view of cultural and historical sites disregards the “wholeness” of the historical fabric while the “whole” cannot be divided or broken into pieces as Alexander (2002) argued (cited in Ghahremani & Hashemi, 2018: 64). Also, as discussed in the literature, the competitive-led approach can overlook the complexities of social processes and contextual particularities at a local scale (Furtado et al., 2022; Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). It can also lead to diluting local meanings and cultural values of different localities (Lin & Hsing, 2009). In the case study, these aspects can be seen in the dissatisfaction arising from new development, the gentrification processes affecting both local communities and small-scale businesses and the concerns over the loss of local and cultural identity.

Current development initiatives place less emphasis on enriching the area by encouraging local cultural production and community cultural strategies. Regarding cultural production, local cultural and creative industries, including cinemas, theatres, traditional performing arts, crafts, and bookshops have historically played a significant role in the area and hold the potential to contribute to the area's culture-led regeneration. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that local cultural and creative industries, such as the area's cinemas and theatres, have been deemed "old", and their demolition and replacement with more profitable activities have been justified due to not meeting expected efficiency. This poses a significant risk to Mashhad residents' historical memory and their perception of the city. Moreover, community cultural strategies have remained largely sidelined in the current regeneration initiatives. The results of this study show that there is not a huge effort in mobilising local communities to integrate cultural resources into urban regeneration, coordinate different interests, and foster cooperation between different stakeholders—factors which are immensely influential in the culture-led regeneration trajectory (Park, 2016; Lin & Hsing, 2009). The lack of emphasis on community-led approaches is particularly due to the relatively top-down structure of urban management in Iranian cities, which hinders participatory and bottom-up processes in urban development (Lak and Zarezadeh Kheibari, 2020; Abbaszadegan, et al., 2014).

In presenting an alternative model for culture-led regeneration, our results demonstrate that the area should invest more in facilitating community development and improving the quality of life for the existing community, rather than solely focusing on profit-driven initiatives. Such initiatives have caused population change and relocation of original residents. Some of the suggested community-led strategies include revitalising historical and old buildings as community spaces (tangible local heritage) and enhancing intangible local heritage such as folk cultural events and rituals. The overall importance of the creative-led strategies was significantly higher than that of competitive-led strategies, given the rich artistic and cultural activities of the past and present. Therefore, encouraging artists by allocating old houses to small-scale art workshops, creating 'third spaces' with connectivity to historical traditions, developing public art, and fostering cultural and creative industries can contribute to the area's culture-led regeneration.

The result of the alternative model, particularly the higher priority of community and creative-led approaches over competitive-led, aligns with recent shifts in cultural and creative city policy, which are moving from a more economic-oriented creative agenda towards local and place-based approaches (Afsari Bajestani, et al., 2024; Grodach, 2017). The local and place-based approaches place greater emphasis on local communities and processes, engaging

with the local context, and celebrating vernacular culture and creativity (Afsari Bajestani, et al., 2024). The findings of previous culture-led regeneration studies in Iran also confirm the importance of creative industries and cultural production, which can play a significant role in fostering economic growth and enhancing the quality and vibrancy of historical urban areas in Iran (Pourzakarya and Fadaie Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2020; Lak, et al., 2020).

As identified in the literature, different approaches to culture-led regeneration are not practised exclusively (Griffiths, 1995), and often competing approaches co-exist within any one place (Afsari Bajestani, et al., 2024). Consequently, community-led and creative-led strategies can co-exist with competitive-led strategies. The results of the Delphi technique also confirm the applicability of competitive-led strategies to a lesser extent in the case area, particularly due to the proximity of the area to the Imam Reza Holy Shrine. Some of the strategies and policies recommended in this study include organising large-scale cultural events relevant to Mashhad's history and the Imam Reza Holy Shrine or enhancing the area's image based on the thematisation of existing assets. Competitive-led strategies can contribute to the cultural branding of the area, which is also influential in the culture-led regeneration of historical fabrics in Iran (Pourzakarya and Fadaie Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2020). However, given the higher priority of community and creative-led approaches, competitive-led strategies should not dominate culture-led regeneration practices to avoid potential adverse effects such as increased inequality, gentrification, and the commodification of culture and urban spaces (Afsari Bajestani, et al., 2024; Furtado et al., 2022). The study by Ebrahimi Ghorbani et al. (2021) similarly highlights the efficacy of community-led strategies in the context of culture-led regeneration initiatives in Iran.

This paper examined the role of culture-led regeneration in enhancing the quality of historical and cultural quarters by exploring various approaches, spatial strategies, and practical policies. The spatial strategies and policies presented in this study primarily address the normative dimension of culture-led regeneration. Future studies can focus on substantive and procedural dimensions of culture-led regeneration. This would entail investigating the importance of a political will, strong collaboration and engagement with various stakeholders, including the local community and the private sector, as well as facilitating well-defined cooperation among responsible organisations (Bagheri, et.al., 2022; Park, 2016). Additionally, it is important to note that strategies derived from the Delphi technique reflect experts' opinions, and their alignment with other stakeholders' opinions, particularly local communities', remains to be evaluated. Future studies could investigate residents' or other stakeholders' perspectives to assess the current urban regeneration initiatives and identify appropriate alternative culture-led regeneration strategies.

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Endnotes

- 1 Some of the instances can be seen on the press: <https://shrr.ir/000CvD>;
<https://tn.ai/2941758>
- 2 The term Sar'ab refers to a location where 'ab anbars" were situated. Ab anbars are traditional reservoirs designed to store drinking water and are known for their historical significance in water storage and supply. There is still one remaining 'ab anbar' in Sarab Street.
- 3 isna.ir/xdQ3RC
- 4 During the implementation phase, it was decided to retain the existing street width
- 5 <https://shrr.ir/000GuN>
- 6 <https://shrr.ir/000Fsw>
- 7 <http://www.setaresobh.ir/fa/main/detail/76151/>; <https://cinemakhorasan.com/?p=51808>
- 8 <https://payamema.ir/?p=56492>
- 9 <https://payamema.ir/?p=56492/post/117>
- 10 khabaronline.ir/xgZYt
- 11 <https://khorasannews.com/Newspaper/MobileBlock?NewspaperBlock-ID=10608>
- 12 Recommended events include Iranian story-telling and performance traditions such as "Naqqali", "Pardeh-khaani", "Shahnameh-khaani", "Ta'zieh, and traditional Persian puppetry.

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