

Arefian, Fatemeh Farnaz and Seyed Hossein Iradj Moeini, eds. *Urban Heritage Along the Silk Roads: A Contemporary Reading of Urban Transformation of Historic Cities in the Middle East and Beyond*. London: Springer Nature, 2019. 269 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-22762-3 (eBook). ISBN 978-3-030-22761-6 (hardcover). DOI: 10.22679/avs.2021.6.2.012

The publication's focus targets the contemporary transitions of areas with historic cityscapes. The reader receives a study divided into four parts. The structure can be analysed according to spatial dimensions. The locations of different cities are: Part I – Bahrain, Part II – Iran, Iraq, Serbia, Part III - Syria, Iraq, Gaza, Part IV – Iran, Portugal. In parallel, these parts focus on distinct clusters of topics.

Part I's focus was partly on heritage space as a place of leisure, which became stimulating for the integration of the migrants with the local population. Participation of different groups in social events on the ancient sites had a positive impact on bringing social cohesion. Among the important findings was the role of landscape architecture and the concept of 'Historic Urban Landscape' based on UNESCO's approach. It is understood as 'ensembles of any group of buildings, structures and open spaces, [...], the cohesion and value of which are recognised from the archaeological, architectural, prehistoric, historic, scientific, aesthetic, socio-cultural or ecological point of view' (p. 23). For the proper transition of a heritage district, an important element was a method of evaluating restoration projects in the ancient areas (p. 32, pp. 43-44). This part provided cases of success in maintaining historical sites for the denizens.

In Part II, the authors have emphasised local governments as the main actors. However, other diverse agencies struggle for the lucrative surroundings over the ancient neighbourhoods and some cases illustrate failures of cities' modernisation based on a top-down approach in terms of supporting social cohesion. These experiences often caused discontent inside communities, sometimes followed by the actions from grassroots and international institutions. The result was the correction in the cities' governmental policies for a more inclusive approach in the creation of urban policies. In the context of historical settlements deterioration, the authors propose a concept of 'Neighbourhood Renewal', 'which was the strategy to arrest the wholesale decline of deprived neighbourhoods, reverse it and prevent it from recurring' (pp. 60-61). On this occasion, it raises questions on the type of new system management model, which can be optimal for achieving contradictory goals in city planning.

Part III touches on the issue of the practices of urban policies in cities affected by military conflict. In the project of ancient sites reconstruction, one of the crucial factors turned out to be the engagement of local communities in terms of traditional housing restoration and conservation. The authors observed that 'as a result of community participation, residents got awareness about the cultural value of their houses, and how to maintain them' (p. 137). The restoration became an arena of integration of formal (authorities and business) and informal (guilds of craftsmen) institutions. A pragmatic finding is that: 'performance of traditional buildings using local building techniques is much better than many badly built modern structures' (p. 145). Despite the generally successful outcome, in some cases social and

special segregation maintained the problem. This part leaves the reader with questions on the inclusive reconstruction of the post-war cities.

Part IV presents contradictory views on whether the ancient urban fabric can be adapted to the needs of contemporary city development. It raises a question on continuity in a situation when ancient material heritage is non-existent or impossible to save. One of the authors provides an answer: 'The monuments may have disappeared, but their qualities should live on' (p. 173). The recurrent topic is the re-adaptation of old houses to modern functionalities. The studies use various concepts for the description of provided projects. One of them is 'housing-led regeneration' based on the redevelopment of historical neighbourhoods with grass-roots cooperation. It includes a 'participatory design', which is an inclusive arena for consultation between different agents, especially the local communities. The earlier presented 'Historic Urban Landscape' in this chapter is integrated into a wider framework of 'Heritage Impact Assessments', which is 'a process of identifying, predicting, evaluating and communicating the probable effects' (p. 213) of urban policies. Pedestrian-oriented urban environments were evaluated under the 'Space Syntax' model (pp. 235-235), which includes a quantitative measuring of the impact of elements like physical environment, urban function, accessibility, and natural environment. 'Space Syntax' is an evaluation mechanism in the 'Pedestrian Network Assessment' for street network connectivity.

The heterogeneity of the aspects of urban socio-spatial developments in the historic sites seems to be the strongest side of this publication. It highlights the complexity and variety of heritage cityscape maintenance and transition. This type of research requires years of experience working in the selected areas. Some of the city development dynamics are universal while others are deeply rooted in the particular social, economic, and political context. What can be seen as scholarly important are the research concepts naming specific aspects of the ancient cities' transitions. What I value most are the recommendations on the implementation of social, historical, and infrastructural projects. Among the strong sides of the book, I would highlight it as being mostly an empirical study.

A tiny blot on the landscape concerns methodological questions about case study selection. The reader can be left puzzled by the presented concept 'Silk Road Cities', which refers to a rather blurred framework. What the volume offers is a study on cities in Middle East countries, as well as India, Serbia, and Portugal, but lacks urban entities of East or Central Asia. When the book's key approach is linking together historical cities in their contemporary transitions, the 'Silk Road' axis, without including studies on China, Uzbekistan et cetera, seems excessive and inessential.

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