Urban Renewal Mega Projects and Residents' Quality of Life: Evidence from Historical Religious Center of Mashhad Metropolis

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Abstract Urban decay is the process by which a historical city center, or an old part of a city, falls into decrepitude and faces serious problems. Urban management, therefore, implements renewal mega projects with the goal of physical and functional revitalization, retrieval of socioeconomic capacities, and improving of quality of life of residents. Ignoring the complexities of these large-scale interventions in the old and historical urban fabrics may lead to undesirable consequences, including an additional decline of quality of life. Thus, the present paper aims to assess the impact of renewal mega projects on residents' subjective quality of life, in the historical religious district of the holy city of Mashhad (Samen District). A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of impact assessment, including questionnaires, semi-structured personal interviews, and direct observation, is used in this paper. The results yield that the Samen Renewal Project has significantly reduced the resident's subjective quality of life, due to its undesirable impacts on physical, socio-cultural, and economic environments.

Keywords Quality of life · Urban renewal · Mega project · Impact assessment · Mashhad · Iran

Introduction

Decaying the primary cores and historical districts of cities is one of the most common challenges in the urban development process. As these areas dilapidate physically, not only do they lose their ability to meet the needs of the residents but also they pose social, cultural, and economic challenges to the city [1]. In addition, the historical, sociocultural, and economic values incorporated in these areas necessitate the urban management intervening under urban renewal projects. These large-scale interventions aim for physical and functional revitalization, retrieval of socioeconomic capacities, and improvement of quality of life (QOL) of residents [2]. On the other hand, lack of comprehensive perspective in preparation and implementation of these mega projects may cause undesirable physical, sociocultural, and economic consequences, and significantly degrades the QOL in these traditional urban fabrics [3]. Indeed, not only is the improvement in QOL one of the first and foremost targets of urban renewal projects in worn-out districts but also implementation of these mega projects and their physical, socio-cultural, and economic impacts can change the QOL, directly and indirectly. Measuring the QOL during the implementation of urban renewal projects can help assess previous planning strategies and policies, identify residents' dissatisfaction factors, prioritize problems and challenges, and design future

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planning policies to improve the strengths and reduce the weaknesses of the projects [4, 5].

In recent years, an examination of QOL in urban areas has been widely approached by researchers in various fields. In this regard, the QOL has been the focus of widespread urban planning studies as a tool for planning livable and sustainable cities [6, 7]. However, these studies vary in several aspects, such as QOL definitions, conceptual models, domains, geographical scale, indicator type, time frame, and context [8, 9]. QOL studies are different from one another, not only conceptually but also in terms of methodology and measurement indicators. While the "Quality of Life" has long been an explicit or implicit policy goal, a universally acceptable definition has not been arrived at yet [10]. This is due to the fact that the concept of QOL is a broad multidimensional and relative concept [11]. The central methodological debate is the distinction between the two concepts of subjective and objective QOL. The objective approach is most typically limited to the analysis, and reporting of secondary data usually aggregate data at different geographic or spatial scales. In contrast, the subjective approach is specifically designed to collect primary data at the disaggregate or individual level using social survey methods where the focus is on the peoples' behaviors and assessments of different aspects of QOL in general and of quality of urban life in particular [12, 13]. In this regard, various domains and indicators have been used to measure the QOL due to differences in the goals and targets of the study, the personal judgment of the researcher, the characteristics of the study area, and the availability of data (Table 1). On the other hand, while measuring the QOL in urban districts has been widely approached in recent years, study on the relationship between a renewal intervention and QOL has rarely been taken into consideration, which is the main contribution of the present paper to the body of literature.

Methods

Data Collection and Study Variables

The main purpose of the present paper is assessing the impact of urban renewal mega projects on local communities' subjective quality of life, with a focus on historical religious center of Mashhad Metropolis. Since urban mega projects can cause a combination of

Table 1 Representative definitions and domains of quality of life

Quality of Life definitions

Szalai [14]	Life quality refers to the degree of excellence or satisfactory character of life.
Marsella et al. [15]	The individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals.
Musschenga [16]	The good life is a combination of enjoyment (positive mental states), satisfaction (evaluation of success in realizing a life-plan or personal conception of the good life), and excellence (the virtuousness or value of a person's activities).
Mulligan et al. [17]	The satisfaction that a person receives from surrounding human and physical conditions.
McCrea et al. [18]	A broad term which encompasses notions of a good life, a valued life, a satisfying life, and a happy life.
Das [11]	Well-being or ill-being of people and the environment in which they live.
Carr [19]	Life quality at a precise moment in time.

Quality of Life domains

Cummins [20]	Material well-being, health, productivity, belonging, safety, community, and emotional well-being.
Mitchell [21]	Security, health, personal development, community development, physical environment and natural resources, and goods and services.
Hazel et al. [22]	Education, employment, energy, environment, health, human rights, income, infrastructures, security, reform, and housing.
Mitchell et al. [23]	Health, physical environment, natural resources, personal development, and security.
Johansson [24]	Economic resources and status of consumers, status of employment and work, accessibility to educational opportunities, health and medical care, family and social relationships, housing and its facilities, culture and leisure, personal security and properties, political resources and participation.
Kamp et al. [8]	Person characteristics, health, economy, services accessibility, built environment, natural resources, natural environment, safety and security, community, culture, and life style.
Rojas [25]	Health, economy, career, family, friends, one's self and community.
Lee [4]	Civic services, neighborhood satisfaction, community status, neighborhood environmental assessment, and local attachments.

quantitative and qualitative impacts, we need to combine the quantitative and qualitative assessment methods to deeply understand these effects. The present study used mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, which implies collecting and analyzing quantitative and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within one study. This method typically is used to explain and interpret the quantitative results through a qualitative analysis [26, 27]. This paper used questionnaires, semi-structured personal interviews, and direct observation as data-collecting techniques. The sampling method was systematic random sampling with random walk technique. In this technique, instructions are given to the interviewer to follow a random route and interview individuals (take first road right, interview at second house on your left, continue down the road, interview tenth household on your right, and so on) [28]. The paper used IBM SPSS Sample Power (version 3.0.1) to determine the sample size for the questionnaire. Considering the maximum probability of 5% for error type I and 20% for error type II (minimum test power of 80%) and the minimum effect size of 0.2, the required sample size was calculated as 150. For personal interviews, the sample size was based on theoretical saturation. Thirty local residents, 15 local shopkeepers, 10 pilgrims, and 3 real estate consultants were studied in depth through semi-structured interviews. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of QOL of this research considering the main targets of the study, the characteristics of the study area, and the availability of data.

Case Study

Mashhad is the second most populous city in Iran and the second-largest holy city in the world [29]. Mashhad attracts more than 30 million tourists and pilgrims every year, many of whom come to pay homage to the Imam Reza shrine (the eighth Shi'ite Imam). It has been a magnet for travelers since the medieval times. The central district of Mashhad (the primary and historical core of the city around the Holy Shrine which is known as Samen District) was facing serious physical and functional deterioration. With the goal of improving quality of life of residents and upgrading the performance and competitiveness of the tourism industry, a large-scale governmental intervention was planned under the "Samen Renewal Project" in 1992. The project is the largest and longest-running public-sector renewal intervention in Iran. Nowadays, this urban renewal mega

project, which runs in an area of approximately 366 ha by Samen Renovation Organization, has become a major challenge to the Mashhad's urban management. So, this project has only achieved 50% physical progress about 25 years after it started [30].

Such a large-scale and long-term intervention in the historical religious fabric of the city has led to a wide range of impacts and consequences, one of the most important of which is changing the QOL. In this regard, zone 3 of Samen District has experienced the highest degree of physical intervention among the rest of the district. With over 104 ha, this sector accounted for about 30% of the total Samen District, and with a population of 5365 ranking second among the rest of the district. At present, the zone is a perfect laboratory to assess the impacts of large-scale renewal project on quality of life in historical urban districts (Fig. 2).

Results

In the statistical sample, 76 males (50.7%) and 74 females (49.3%) responded to the questionnaire which indicates a common sexual ratio (102.7). The average age is 36.9, the lower bound is 17, and the upper bound is 72. 46% of the sample population are non-native, indicating the high degree of immigration within the study area. In addition, 36.7% of the respondents were living in the area for less than 5 years and 65.3% less than 10 years, which represents the evacuation of the study area by permanent local residents. Table 2 represents the results of the questionnaire in which the local residents' satisfaction with physical, socio-cultural, and economic circumstances of their living environment was inquired.

Table 3 shows that, on average, the sample population scored their own QOL of 3.30 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. In fact, the respondents assessed their own QOL (subjective QOL) to be lower than the average level (5.50). On the other hand, the comparison of subjective QOL by sex shows that the women's average score was lower than the men's QOL average score. In addition, one-sample *t* test indicates that the sample results can be generalized to the statistical population and the subjective QOL in the statistical population is also lower than the average level with a confidence level of 99% (Table 4). Pearson correlation coefficient shows that physical circumstances of the environment have the strongest correlation with the subjective QOL among

Fig. 1 Conceptual model of components and domains that contribute to subjective quality of life

the components in the study area. In fact, by increasing the satisfaction of the physical environment, the residents' subjective QOL increases, and vice versa. In addition, the domain of social order has the strongest correlation with the subjective QOL (Table 5).

Accessibility

One of the factors affecting the QOL in the urban neighborhoods is residents' access to business centers, employment cores, and recreation centers. In this regard, pedestrians' access to safe paths with adequate facilities (especially for vulnerable groups such as children, women, elderly, and disabled people) plays a key role [27]. Suitable street lighting, proper urban furniture, and the safety of pedestrians are essential requirements of an appropriate access [31]. Nearly 70% of the respondents

were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the lighting of the passageways. Concerning the efficiency of urban furniture, 34% of the respondents were completely dissatisfied, 37.3% were dissatisfied, 23.3% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4.7% were satisfied, and only 0.7% were completely satisfied. Additionally, more than two thirds of the respondents were completely dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the safety of the pedestrians.

One of the main goals of Samen Renewal Project was to reorganize the existing roads and local streets, as well as construction of new link routes to improve the access of residents and pilgrims to commercial, recreational, and accommodation centers, and also, the Holy Shrine. In this regard, the construction of two boulevards and a few service routes around the renovated commercial-residential centers are the main actions of the project in

Fig. 2 Samen District of Mashhad and the study area

Table 2 Local residents' satisfaction from their living environment.

Components	Domains	Indicators	Completely dissatisfied (%)	Dissatisfied (%)	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (%)	Satisfied (%)	Completely satisfied (%)
Physical environment	Accessibility	Street lighting	38.0	30.7	27.3	3.3	0.7
		Street furniture	34.0	37.3	23.3	4.7	0.7
		Pedestrian safety	28.7	39.3	27.3	4.0	0.7
	Spatial structure	Renovation	30.0	42.7	20.7	6.7	0.0
		Public spaces	40.0	35.3	19.3	4.0	1.3
		Environmental pollutions	28.7	43.3	24.0	4.0	0.0
	Land-use pattern	Access to urban facilities	29.3	40.0	26.0	4.0	0.7
		Land-use Compatibility	22.7	51.3	22.0	2.0	2.0
Socio-cultural environment	Social order	Crime	38.0	41.3	16.7	4.0	0.0
		Entry of strangers	32.7	41.3	21.3	4.7	0.0
	Social cohesion	Social interactions	16.7	36.0	36.7	8.7	2.0
		Ethnic-cultural convergence	36.7	36.7	20.0	6.0	0.7
Economic environment	Personal livelihood	Income level	47.3	34.7	14.7	3.3	0.0
		Economic assets	46.0	35.3	15.3	3.3	0.0

the study area [30]. Construction of these new roads has led to extensive destruction of the old routes in this zone. As a result, the residents and pilgrims have been forced to use alternative and temporary routes over two decades.

Field survey indicates that only the service routes that belong to the renovated commercial-residential parts (shopping malls, luxury hotels, and accommodation centers) are well designed and well equipped with the proper lighting and furniture. In contrast, the temporary routes (which

include most of the pathways in the study area) lack appropriate street lighting and well-designed urban furniture.

In addition, the temporary routes lack necessary safety precautions for pedestrians against cars and motorcycles. Indeed, the Samen Renovation Organization has prioritized providing access to income-generating commercial-residential projects and has ignored the improvement of temporary local routes that are considered costly. This has severely reduced the accessibility quality in the study area.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for quality of life in the study area

Statistic										
Quality of life	95% confidence interval for mean			Median	Mode	Variance	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Range
	Mean	Lower	Upper							
Total	3.3000	2.9868	3.6132	3.0000	2.00	3.768	1.94125	1.00	9.00	8.00
Men	4.1579	3.7490	4.5668	4.0000	3.00	3.201	1.78925	2.00	9.00	7.00
Women	2.4189	2.0278	2.8100	2.0000	1.00	2.850	1.68805	1.00	8.00	7.00
N	Skewness			Std. error of skewness			Kurtosis		Std. error of kurtosis	
150	0.790			0.198			−0.200		0.394	

Table 4 One-sample *t* test for quality of life in the study area

One-sample *t* test
test value = 5.5

<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
				Lower	Upper
-13.880	149	0.000	-2.20000	-2.5132	-1.8868

...The renewal project has had nothing but destruction for the residents of this neighbourhood. Many local streets have been destroyed in order to access to commercial centers, hotels and hostels. Instead, the authorities have opened temporary pathways which cannot be used at night even with a flashlight... (man, 38 years old, local resident).

Spatial Structure

Spatial structure of an urban fabric reflects the coordination between built environment with underlying socio-economic circumstances [32]. Renewal Projects can facilitate urban life and improve the quality of the environment by constant renovation, increasing of well-equipped public spaces, and reduction of environmental pollutions. In this regard, more than 70% of the respondents were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the constant renovation, the desirability of public spaces, and also, the environmental pollutions in their living area.

Table 5 Correlation between components/domains with quality of life in the study area

Components/domains	Quality of life	
	Pearson correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Physical environment	0.878**	0.000
Accessibility	0.819**	0.000
Spatial structure	0.842**	0.000
Land-use pattern	0.780**	0.000
Socio-cultural environment	0.874**	0.000
Social order	0.869**	0.000
Social cohesion	0.748**	0.000
Economic environment	0.747**	0.000
Livelihood	0.747**	0.000

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

One of the most comprehensive indicators for understanding the renovation status in an urban district is the issued construction permit index. Table 6 indicates that the number of building construction permits in the Samen District was a very small proportion of the entire city during 2013–2015. So, the construction permits issued in Samen District in 2013 were 60 (0.8% of the entire city), in 2014, it was 19 (0.03% of the entire city), and in 2015, it was 19 (0.5% of the entire city). On the other hand, although the number of issued permits is negligible, they cover a large area; average area of each of the permits in 2013 is 8640 m², in 2014, it is 4156 square meters, and in 2015, it is equal to 6039 m². Simply put, the construction permits issued in Samen District have been for large-scale residential and commercial projects, not for the local residents' properties. This clearly reflects the capitalistic approach that sponsors this renewal project. An approach emphasizes commercialization and commodification of residential neighborhoods to finance for mega projects, rather than improving residents' quality of life.

On the other hand, interviews with real estate consultants reveal that implementation of Samen Renewal Project is an important factor in decline of small-scale renovation by the residents. As soon as the project was launched, the Samen Renewal Organization issued a freezing decree to suspend the construction permits and to prohibit local people from selling their properties other than the organization. As a result, private constructions and small-scale renovations stopped at once. In this situation, local residents are faced with deterioration of their properties and neighborhood. They should either sell their properties at a low price to the organization or wait for an uncertain future [33]. In addition, the field survey shows that new spaces resulting from the destruction of old buildings, which could have been used as urban open spaces, either are currently used as parking lots or become indefensible spaces that significantly exacerbated security problems in the study area.

Table 6 Issued construction permits in Samen District [29]

	2013		2014		2015	
	Number	Area (m ²)	Number	Area (m ²)	Number	Area (m ²)
Samen District	60	518,425	19	78,980	19	114,756
City of Mashhad	7126	10,433,601	52,694	6,107,748	3492	4,091,856
% of the total	0.8%	4.9%	0.03%	1.29%	0.5%	2.8%

... Before the project started, our neighbourhood had places where the youth or the elderly could get together and spend their free time. But after the destruction, no place is left for us to hang out. This project has only created many ruins which are the suitable places for delinquency and crime... (woman, 59 years old, local resident).

Moreover, although one of the main justifications for the Samen Renewal Project was unsanitariness of the Samen District [30], the interviews and field surveys demonstrate that environmental pollution is significantly exacerbated. In this regard, the demolished buildings and ruins have become rubbish and construction waste dumps. In this respect, Mashhad Health Organization ranks the Samen District first in outbreak of cutaneous leishmaniasis in Mashhad [33]. On the other hand, long-term construction of commercial-residential centers and roads has led to noise pollutions. These pollutions can affect the physical and mental health of the residents and, eventually, increase the incidences of infectious, microbial, respiratory, and cardiac diseases.

... We wish to return to the unsanitary situation before the project. The project has had nothing for us but dust, mud, noise, and ruins... (woman, 37 years old, local resident).

Land-Use Pattern

Land-use planning affects residents' quality of life in two aspects: (1) change in residents' access to urban facilities and (2) the environmental impacts of land uses in surrounding neighborhoods [3]. In this regard, nearly two thirds of the respondents were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with their access to urban facilities, and nearly three quarters were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the compatibility of activities within their living area.

It was expected that the Samen Renewal Project would carefully allocate the public facilities and services in order to balance the needs of residents against the pilgrims. However, the results are observed to be completely in contrast with these expectations. In 2008, due to slow progress of the project, the authorities decided to attract investors for financing and improving the speed of the implementation. To this end, the Samen Renewal Organization made important changes in the proposed land-use plan. Based on these changes, the proposed small-scale residential land uses were converted into large-scale commercial-residential activities. Consequently, many local houses were purchased using the legal power with low price from locals. These local properties were then aggregated and converted to large lots for the construction of commercial towers, malls and shopping centers, and luxury hotels. In fact, the Samen Renewal Organization concentrated on implementation of large-scale commercial and residential centers instead of providing educational, sanitarian, medical service centers. On the other hand, interviews with pilgrims revealed that these large-scale commercial and residential centers are only suitable for wealthy pilgrims and they have made it harder for the low-income pilgrims to access affordable services and facilities.

... In the past, we used to stay in local residents' houses. They did not have good quality, but were very affordable for low-income pilgrims. Now these houses have been destroyed and luxury hotels have been built that most pilgrims cannot afford to stay in ... (man, 39 years old, pilgrim).

Social Order

Social order is contrasted to social chaos or disorder and refers to a stable state of society in which the existing social order is accepted and maintained by its members

[34]. Failure to timely consider the factors exacerbating the social disorder can lead to serious problems in people's everyday life. Scholars have corroborated that life quality is deeply affected by feelings of anomie and that anomic people tend to have a lower life satisfaction [35]. Crimes such as drug and alcohol trafficking, extortion, harassment, and prostitution can significantly reduce the QOL in urban neighborhoods. On the other hand, the strangers' entrance to residential neighborhoods without adequate supervision not only can increase criminal activities but also has a significant reducing effect on life satisfaction [36]. In this regard, 79.3% of the respondents were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the number of criminal incidences in their area, and also, 74% were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the entrance of strangers in their personal living.

The 2016 official crime statistics of the Mashhad Police Department are consistent with the views of the respondents [37]. Integrating the crime statistics with the location of crime in Mashhad clearly indicates the concentration of crime hotspots in the Samen District (Fig. 3). In fact, the boundary of crime occurrence is clearly aligned with the physical boundary of Samen District. It represents a relation between the physical, socio-cultural, and economic circumstances of the district with the occurrence of crimes. In addition, examination of the number of defendants held in Mashhad Central Prison shows that the Samen District ranks first in crimes against public decency and morality, fraud, crime against person, and crime against property. Moreover, the district ranks second in other crimes, such as addiction, theft, and drug trafficking in the city of Mashhad (Fig. 4). In addition to undesirable socioeconomic circumstances of the district, lack of planning for indefensible spaces (corners and L- and U-shape spaces) and desolate properties that resulted from the widespread destructions of Samen Renewal Project has significantly contributed to the probability of crime.

...Robbery and extortion happen in this neighbourhood every day. The reason is clear: the entire neighbourhood is dark and ruined and turned into a crime place for thieves and addicts... (man, 53 years old, local shopkeeper).

Interviews also show that the most important factor in increasing the strangers' entrance is the unbridled

increase in the number of residential units, hotels, and hostels constructed based on the recommendations of the renewal project. On the other hand, due to the degradation of the neighborhood quality, old residents have started to leave their houses to rent them to tourists and pilgrims illegally. Official statistics show that in the Samen District, there are currently 3300 illegal private houses used for pilgrims' accommodation [33].

... Most of the old residents of the neighbourhood are gone now. Instead, many of their houses have turned into hostels. Sometimes seven families from seven different cities of Iran with seven different cultures stay in these hostels in a week... (woman, 45 years old, local resident).

Social Cohesion

Another factor influencing the quality of life is social cohesion. The social cohesion refers to the sense of integrity and convergence in a society and the level of social relations and group interactions based on shared and collective values [38]. More than half of the respondents were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the quality of social interactions, and nearly three quarters of them were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the ethnic-cultural convergence of their neighborhood.

In this regard, Fig. 5 obviously indicates that the Samen District has been experiencing significant population loss over the past two decades. The district is currently considered as a shrinking district, which is being evacuated from its residents. Two types of migration can be identified in the district. The first type is forced migration of old residents as a result of implementation of the project. In this regard, the Samen Renewal Organization has forced the local residents to sell their properties using its coercive leverage to provide enough land for the project. The second type concerns the residents who were resisting or refusing to sell their property at the beginning either because of the low price offered by the organization or for personal reasons such as attachment to their old residence. These residents were eventually forced to leave their neighborhoods due to the unfavorable environmental conditions that affect the quality of their lives. The interviewees believe that social interactions were significant before the project, and even relatives were living in the same

Fig. 3 Intensity of Crime Locations in Mashhad.

neighborhood and in the vicinity. However, with the displacement of the old residents, the traditional social relations in these neighborhoods have declined severely. On the other hand, due to the low quality of the district, the new inhabitants are often from the poor migratory class. The Samen District is currently the second destination of non-Iranian immigrants in Mashhad, especially the Afghan-born [29]. As a result, ethnic-cultural harmony of the district has declined significantly.

Livelihood

The personal/family livelihood not only has a direct impact on the subjective quality of life but also is an

important factor in the ability of residents to participate in the renovation [39, 40]. The income level is directly related to resident's employment, and the land and property are the most important economic assets in the Samen District. More than 80% of respondents are dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the level of their income and economic assets.

The Holy Shrine has made the Samen District, one of the most profitable tourist attractions in Iran. The interviews show that, before the project, the main occupation of residents is tourist-related retailing as well as renting their personal houses to the pilgrims and tourists. However, the local retail trade has been heavily affected by

Fig. 4 Number of defendants in each district of Mashhad

Year	1996	2006	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Mashhad Metropolis	1877414	2575429	2807464	2856691	2906782	2957751	3027692	3088118	3150855
Samen District	46107	32330	21456	19795	18255	16825	15456	14239	13118
% of the Total	2.45 %	1.25 %	0.76 %	0.69 %	0.62 %	0.56 %	0.51 %	0.46 %	0.41 %

Fig. 5 Population change in Mashhad [29]

the large-scale shopping centers and malls that are proposed by the project.

...After the project, many properties were destroyed and replaced by glamorous malls and shopping centres. Most of our customers were drawn to these centres. We did not have the ability to compete, so we lost our customers and had no choice but to close the shop... (man, 31 years old, local shopkeeper).

Interviews with real estate consultants reveal that the project has reduced the property value of local residents. The freezing decree prohibited local people from selling their properties other than the Samen Renewal Organization. However, the price set by the organization had a dramatic difference to the real value of the properties in a regular housing market. In fact, the organization

bought the residents' properties at a very low price by using eminent domain law in a coercive manner. On the other hand, long-term implementation of the project has had a diminishing impact on the value of local properties. Pointing to the fact that in the past, the neighborhood used to be a source of income for the residents, locals believe that the project has significantly removed their jobs and personal/family income.

...I definitely disagree with the positive impact of the project on the value of local properties. We had to sell off our properties for a cheap price; otherwise the Samen Renewal Organization would cut off our electricity, gas and drinking water services. The value increase has only happened to large-scale commercial lands owned by investors, not to the local properties... (women, 43 years old, local resident).

Discussion

Urban decay has no single cause in Iran; it results from a combination of interrelated factors including poor urban planning, lack of attention to infill development policies, lack of public-private investment to improve worn-out infrastructures and facilities, poverty of the local populace, and depopulation by old residents. Consequently, many inner city districts in Iran are blighted by unemployment, riddled with poor housing and socially excluded from more prosperous districts. In this condition, government renewal interventions seem to be necessary in the old urban fabrics. Such renewal projects often improve the physical and functional efficiency, restore socio-economic capacities, and improve the quality of life of residents. However, any intervention in local communities, against the potential benefits, can have significant social, cultural, economic, and environmental costs.

In this regard, the Samen Renewal Organization has physically intervened in the historical religious center of Mashhad with the goal of improving the residents' quality of life and upgrading the performance and

competitiveness of the tourism industry. Since its inception, a lack of access to sustainable and stable financial resources turned into a serious challenge for the implementation of this urban renewal mega project. As the federal and national government refused to allocate funds to the project, the renewal organization was forced to fund the project in a self-sufficient manner.

This financing pattern has made the initial goals of the project move towards the goals of investors. Subsequently, the development of tourism industry has become the main goal of the project as the best opportunity to attract investors in the historical religious center of Mashhad. In this regard, the organization has adopted a destructive, elitist, imposing, and non-cooperative approach to provide the investors' interests relying on its political and financial power. This capitalist look to the residential neighborhoods around the Holy Shrine not only has marginalized social goals and the needs of the local populace but also has diminished the residents' subjective quality of life due to its undesirable physical, socio-cultural, and economic consequences (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 Samen renewal mega project and quality of life of residents

Conclusions

Decaying historical city centers and old urban districts cause serious challenges to the cities such as depopulation, economic collapse, abandoned buildings and infrastructures, high local unemployment, fragmented families, crime, and a desolate cityscape. Urban renewal projects are, therefore, planned by urban management in order to improve the decayed urban fabrics. However, the present paper demonstrates that a lack of comprehensive approach addressing all physical, socio-cultural, and economic issues of these large-scale interventions may lead to undesirable effects and significantly reduce the subjective quality of life of residents.

In this regard, the analyses show that the Samen Renewal Project has physically intervened in the historical religious center of Mashhad by adopting a destructive, top-down, capitalist, and non-cooperative approach relying on political and financial power. This intervention has had undesirable physical, socio-cultural, and economic impacts on residential neighborhoods surrounding the Holy Shrine of Mashhad Metropolis. On average, 69.3% of the respondents in the zone 3 of Samen District were dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with accessibility, 73.3% with spatial structure, 71.6% with land-use pattern, 76.6% with social order, 63% with social cohesion, and 81.6% with livelihood in their living area. These undesirable effects have significantly reduced the residents' subjective quality of life. The sample population scored their own QOL of 3.30 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. In this respect, women's subjective QOL is lower than men's score. In addition, one-sample *t* test indicates that the subjective QOL in the statistical population is also lower than the average level with a confidence level of 99%. Furthermore, correlation analysis also revealed that the physical circumstances of the environment have the strongest correlation with the subjective QOL in the study area with Pearson coefficient of 0.878.

The present paper concludes that the Samen Renewal Project had a serious deviation from the initial goals of renovation towards the goals of investors. It happened due to lack of strategic planning for sustainable financing of the project by the Samen Renewal Organization. As a result, the capitalist vision for the residential neighborhoods around the Holy Shrine ignored the needs of locals against the interest of tourists, pilgrims, and especially investors. It should be emphasized that what can be seen now in the Samen District is not just a computational mistake in the formulation

and implementation of the project. It is precisely happening because of political economy of Mashhad. Indeed, tourism industry attraction and its subsequent economic rent in the historical religious district of Mashhad have marginalized social goals, and consequently, the economic profitability has become a priority for the urban management. Thus, the future studies need to recognize the political economy of space in the historical religious district of Mashhad metropolis, and respond how the Samen Renewal Project can be revised based on residents' quality of life, the needs of tourists, and the interests of investors.

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