

Analysing the master plan development and urban heritage of Najaf City in Iraq

Analysis of
urban heritage
of Najaf City

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper is intended to assess the developments conducted on the master plan of Old Najaf, mainly in three areas: the Imam Ali Holy Shrine and its surroundings, the Great Market Area and the location of the Town of Visitors.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to analyse the implementation of the transformation phases in Old Najaf, the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) technique was used to identify and organise the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to the examined case study of the city's historic centre. At the first stage, all available data (photographs, maps, documents and reports) were collected from different sources, including previous studies by governmental institutions, departments and agencies. Ultimately, the SWOT analysis was used for each identified phase in the morphological evolution of the historic centre. This can offer an opportunity to observe the implications of urban planning practices in Old Najaf from the mid-20th century to the present day. In order to identify the well-organised urban design practices and appropriate strategies, the implemented studies and projects were examined by the four factors of the SWOT analysis.

Findings – The current results have revealed important urban transformations, already made and/or ongoing, of those aforementioned three main areas, which imply a great loss of the city's traditional character and urban heritage. Further, the environmental and socio-economic issues should be involved in the analysis to evaluate how they have influenced the current outcomes of Old Najaf in relation to the urban configuration and orientation.

Originality/value – The rich cultural and architectural heritage of Al-Najaf historic centre is dramatically neglected and seriously threatened to be lost. Hence, conservation on both tangible and intangible levels is urgently needed. It is the first paper which focussed on this problem and tries to learn from the British Conservation Experiences in this field.

Keywords Urban transformations, Master plan, Historic centre, Urban heritage, Old Najaf

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The historic centres represent the origin cores of the cities, where growth and development have been taking place. As described by Elnokaly and Elseragy (2011), “cities are society's centres of human interaction, creativity, knowledge, diversity, culture, commerce and economic creativity”. Thus, it is in the historic city centres that most of the effects of development occur, which in turn affects both urban and cultural heritage in the area, as well as feelings of identity and sense of belonging (Elnokaly and Elseragy, 2013). Roth (1992)



emphasised that cities are places characterised by landmarks, public spaces and buildings. While the landmarks provide the citizens with a common identity, the public spaces and buildings identify the city scale. Cities have undergone transformations to meet the socio-economic needs of communities and produced a developed urban order over time. Mumford (2011) stated that the city core is associated with collections, neighbourhoods' clusters and the urban characteristics that shape the life style, economic interests and cultural processes. In this sense, Hillier *et al.* (1993) considered cities as economic engines that continuously influence their spatial network properties including the connectivity and accessibility, to which users need to be connected or separated from in relation to the city parts, from centres to suburbs. Modern urban development of street networks can impact the logic patterns of historic urban grids and spatial organisation if they do not consider the spatial properties of configuration. Thus, the urban transformations of historic centres can endanger the heritage of the cities if addressed without taking into account a broad variety of aspects, including the economy, environment, modernisation, the preservation of heritage and social needs.

The trend of urban morphological changes in historic centres has become a global matter that attracts the awareness of the city's identity and character. Many of Iraqi historic centres have been subject to this type of development, and the City of Najaf is not an exception.

In that context, the City of Najaf has a long historic development since it has experienced a series of changes, developments and transformations in its historic centre. This evolution has been mainly driven by economic interests and attempted to introduce contemporary architecture and modern planning practices (Figure 1). Regardless of the intentions of these morphological changes, there are many physical and spatial changes that impacted the density of historic urban fabrics, hierarchy of urban places, direction, of growth processes and the city planning in general. To understand the cumulative development processes in such historic centres – being the result of an interaction among building forms, spatial configurations, social settings, economic activities and their surrounding environments – the master plan should be described and analysed based on its morphological formation and transformation (Alobaydi, 2017; Alobaydi and Rashid, 2017; Conzen, 1960, 1968; Southworth and Owens, 1993). This paper

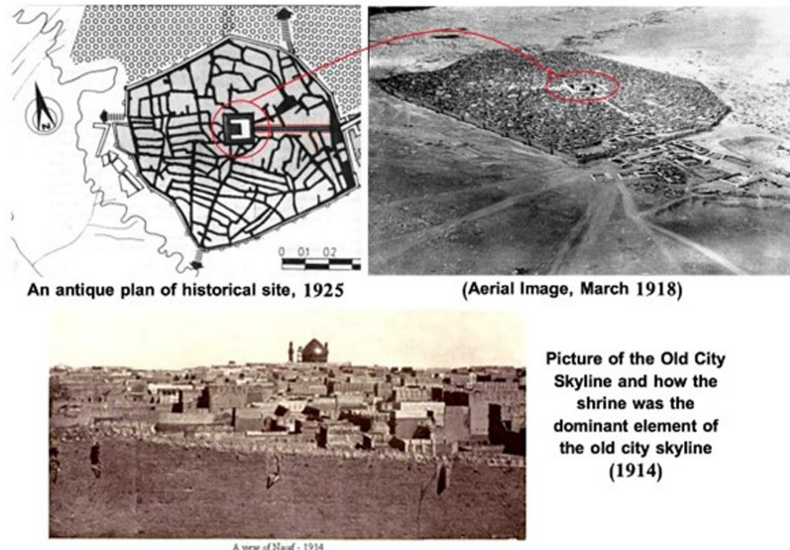


Figure 1.
Showing the origins of
Old Najaf and Imam
Ali Shrine

is intended to analyse the development of the master plan of the historic city centre of Najaf during different historical phases. The master plan has always provided a conceptual framework to guide the development of future growth and the dynamic long-term planning (Conzen, 1968; Whitehand, 2001; Whitehand *et al.*, 2009). However, before this objective is achieved, and with a view to understanding that the urban formation and transformations of historical centres are not exclusive to Islamic holy cities, two cases of Western cities in which various aspects shape the urban landscape are also described.

There is an extensive literature to study the urban morphological development describing the spatial typologies, urban patterns and growth processes in the urban cores and suburbs; nevertheless, there is a lack of comparative inquiries into the assessment of master plans applied to historic centres within a context of urban heritage (Southworth and Owens, 1993; Whitehand, 1992, 2001; Whitehand *et al.*, 2011; Whitehand and Gu, 2007). Tian and Shen (2011) evaluated the implementation processes of the master plan of Guangzhou, a port city northwest of Hong Kong, China. They used the grid overlay method to analyse and compare the difference between the existing land use and the land use plan, which was supposed to be applied. They concluded that the implementation of public facilities open places seemed to be more successful in comparison to the commercial, residential and industrial uses. For the Old Town of Lijiang, China, Li *et al.* (2020) studied the limitations of the government's control in managing the role of urban heritage management (UHM) to face the rapid urbanisation. They highlighted the role of community participation (residents, elites and community-based organisations) in the process of decision-making taking into account the UHM. The study concluded that the public awareness needs to be raised, and the current role of community participation is limited to the information and consultation.

Studies dealing with sustainable issues – including concepts, models and techniques using natural resources to protect and preserve the landscape, open spaces, urban form, architecture and environment – covered relevant topics in this regard. Lami and Mecca (2020) proposed a framework combined with the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis to reach suitable urban strategies and solutions to form well-structured spaces, both socially and functionally. Cysek-Pawlak and Pabich (2021) examined the relationship between walkability and new urbanism within the context of urban regeneration, supporting the needs of pedestrians. The study statistically evaluated the flow of pedestrians to confirm that there is a relationship between walkability and other urban forms (social, economic and environmental) which can influence the movement patterns. Thus, this relationship can be improved through user behaviour in public spaces, improved commercial behaviour in public spaces and the evolution of property prices, as well as visual attractiveness.

A quantitative approach through methods and models to address urban development and urban problems has been limited due to the difficulty of collecting and analysing data. Studies based on the micro-economic model to analyse the examined data at the regional level (Alobaydi and Rashid, 2017; McGough and Tsolacos, 1999; Silver and Goode, 1990) identified the values of syntactic properties of spatial configuration to identify the patterns of syntactic structures from the city centre to the suburbs. In addition, Bramley and Leishman (2005a, b) used a data-based panel to study the implications of national and regional planning policies on the local housing market. Henneberry *et al.* (2005a, b) adopted the cross-sectional data approach to assess the influence of urban planning practises on commercial real-estate markets in England.

Despite the efforts made by the aforementioned literature, research on implementation processes of master plans in relation to the urban heritage is rare in Iraq, due to the imposed urban planning applications and/or arbitrary actions. Moreover, there are few studies on this specific topic in Iraqi cities (Al-Saaidy and Alobaydi, 2021; Alobaydi, 2017; Alobaydi and Rashid, 2017; Jasim Essa Al-Saaidy and Alobaydi, 2021). Hence, this paper aims to fill the current gap and study the City of Najaf. This paper is organised into three main parts. First, the topics and issues of transformations occurred at the historic centres are introduced; also, the literature

review helped identify the research gap. Next, the case study and relevant issues are described and analysed. Finally, the results are described and discussed and conclusions are drawn.

2. Historic background

2.1 The case study of Old Najaf

The ancient City of Najaf is located 160 km southwest of Baghdad, Iraq. It is bordered on the north and north-west by Wadi-Al-Salam Cemetery, the so-called Valley of Peace, and is bordered by barren lands known as the Western Desert. Najaf's historic centre is located on a hill, 60 m above sea level, in such a way that it overlooks the orchards and land from the south and south-east, as well as the large water body known as the Sea of Najaf. To the east, the city is linked to orchards and agricultural land in Kufa, an old town 10 km away. Consequently, according to [Farhan *et al.* \(2018\)](#), the historic City of Najaf loses the advantages and characteristics of the cities in central locations.

With a view to understand the spatial organisation of Old Najaf, the city's historic centre, [Figure 2](#) shows the main monuments and facilities formed over time in the historic centre.

Imam Ali Shrine is located in the core of the city's historic centre, which made the shrine become the most prominent landmark and the centre of the religious and social activities after the fall of the Umayyad state in the year 750 AD ([Kamona, 2008](#)). The sanctuary is characterised by the dominance of its golden dome and the two minarets, which had a major impact on the old city skyline. The main courtyard, with five entrances ([Olsen, 2004](#)), is known as Al-Sahan, and surrounds the Holy Shrine. The eastern entrance consists of two gates (Bab al-Kabeer and Bab-Muslim Ibn Aqil) located on the axis passing through the Great Market. This entrance is on the main façade of the shrine, the eastern façade. The rest of the gates are distributed on the other sides, namely Babal-Tusi from the north, Babal-Qibla from the southern side and the Babal-Emarah on the western side ([Kamona, 2005](#)).

The site is currently located in the middle of a square boundary that includes the buildings of the shrine and other buildings surrounding it ([Figure 3](#)). This area was formed by the removal and demolition of the old urban historic fabric which was surrounding the shrine

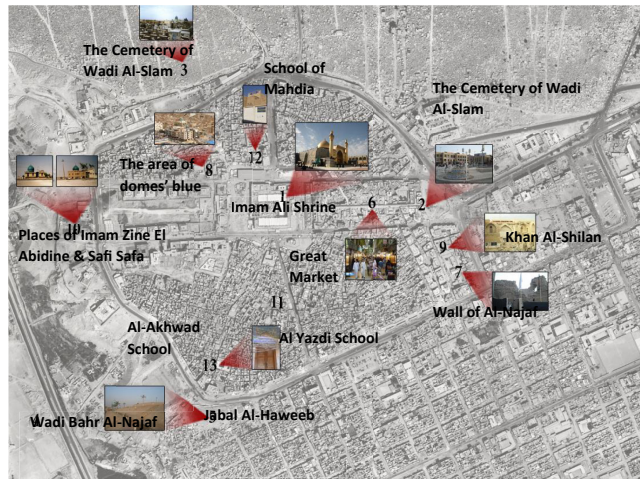
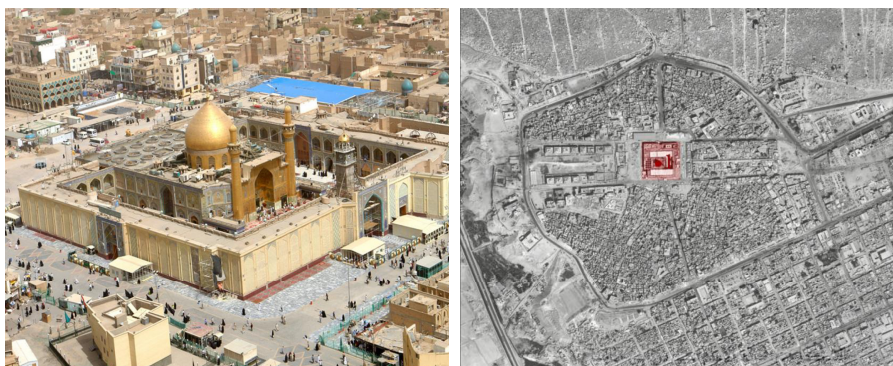


Figure 2.
Main landmarks in
Old Najaf

Source(s): Department of Planning-Governorate of Karbala (2016)



Source(s): Municipality of Najaf

Figure 3.
The Shrine of Imam Ali
location

(Al-Kubaisy, 2009). Currently, it contains a range of modern and temporary structures for public health facilities, places for ablutions, water-drinking points, security controls, as well as temporary steel frames and shading systems. The existence of these temporary services may negatively affect any future planning attempt to revive the historic urban fabric of the city and develop this site (Al-Hasoon, 2015). It should be also noted that the number of pilgrims (visitors) to the shrine was calculated at entry and exit from the main entrance at peak time on Fridays, reaching approximately 123,700 visitors (Al-Jid, 2006).

Before the arrival of modern planning practices, the historic centre of Old Najaf was dense, compacted and surrounded by walls. Following that, the historic centre has witnessed remarkable urban changes that required a master plan to include the existing form and guide the future development and extension. Several development studies have taken place in the master plan of Old Najaf: first, the study of Doxiadis Foundation (Doxiadis Associates, 1956); second, the study of the Urban Planning Authority (Department of Planning–Municipality of Najaf, 1979), third, the study of the General Directorate of Urban Planning - Municipality of Najaf (1986), and finally, the Project proposal of Al-Ansari (2007) for the development of Najaf's city centre and the expansion of the Holy Shrine.

The development of master plans of historic centres over time is a global matter for human heritage and faces relevant challenges of urban design and planning. With a view to provide a broader perspective, two international historic centres are next described and analysed. This can show lessons (differences and similarities) in the way developments and extensions occurring in historic centres are handled.

2.2 Other transformed historic centres

As mentioned above, the aim of this paper is to analyse the projects and studies that have evolved the urban fabric of Old Najaf so far, and how this has impacted on its heritage. Therefore, it is worth providing examples of other cities where factors such as modernisation, tourism and cultural events, among others, have been involved in transforming their historic centres:

2.2.1 Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain. The City of Donostia-San Sebastián in the Basque Country, a region in the north of Spain (Europe), is a clear example of the influence of economic interests in the urban landscape of its historic centre. García-Hernández *et al.* (2017) carried out an in-depth analysis of the situation of the *Parte Vieja*, the city's historic centre, which is experiencing a fast touristification process. It is then worth synthesising the main issues these authors found:

- (1) The city's main iconic buildings (mainly hotels and amenities) and infrastructure as the result of tourism in the city;

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- (2) Loss of traditional image; raise of globalised image (commercial brands);
 - (3) Local urban retail trade being replaced by tourist-oriented establishments;
 - (4) Increase in tourism businesses;
 - (5) Increase of rental properties for tourists;
 - (6) Overcrowded (narrow) streets in this city with reduced public space; car parking insufficiency;
 - (7) Loss of population;
 - (8) Raise of a “tourism monoculture”; and
 - (9) Loss of living urban space; change to leisure, culture and global tourism activities;

However, tourists and residents show opposed opinions in relation to the city’s urban landscape. The authors described how visitors see the current situation positively if it does not affect their stay in the city. Also, the hospitality sector, which is against control measures, considers that these conditions constitute a great investment opportunity. In contrast, the residents consider that crowds have a negative impact on their quality of urban life as it involves disorderly conduct in public spaces. Moreover, the residents are against urban regeneration projects in the city’s port area, since these actions would endanger the maritime tradition of the city. Nevertheless, as stated by [García-Hernández et al. \(2017\)](#), the residents also benefit from the cultural practise and the leisure and entertainment amenities of the current (transformed) *Parte Vieja*. This entails that not all implications of tourism activity in the historic city centre are negative.

Among correction measures included in the city’s Tourism Master Plan to find a balance among the stakeholders and the integrity of the city, the following can be highlighted:

- (1) Limitation to the number of tourism properties and hospitality establishments;
- (2) Pedestrianisation of streets; and
- (3) Promotion of sustainable mobility.

2.2.2 Seville, Spain. The city of Seville (Spain), whose historic centre is debated for being one of the largest in Europe, has a clear Muslim and Christian character. The [United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\) \(1987\)](#) included the Cathedral, Alcázar and Archivo de Indias (the main heritage landmarks in the historic city centre) in the list of World Heritage Sites for being “a remarkable monumental complex” and “an exceptional testimony to the civilization of the Almohads as well as that of Christian Andalusia. The Giralda minaret is the masterpiece of Almohad architecture. It stands next to the cathedral with its five naves; the largest Gothic building in Europe, it houses the tomb of Christopher Columbus. The ancient Lonja, which became the Archivo de Indias, contains valuable documents from the archives of the colonies in the Americas.” These assets are a sample of the vast heritage in Seville.

As a result of diverse factors such as the city’s turbulent history – raise and fall of empires, conquests and domination –, international events or contemporary needs, Seville has been undergoing important changes in its historic city centre’s heritage assets. The Cathedral itself is the result of the transformation of a former mosque, which was partially destroyed in 1,401 to build one of the greatest Gothic temples; the Patio de los Naranjos is a courtyard that still preserves the memory of the Great Mosque ([Catedral de Sevilla, 2019](#)). The wall that surrounded the city of Seville was also subject to changes, as it was almost completely demolished during the 19th century ([Morales, 2013](#)). There are several sectors of the wall that still remain ([Consorcio de Turismo de Sevilla, 2020](#)), the Postigo del Aceite, one of the few existing entrances to the city

through the wall, currently between the old shipyard and other contemporary buildings; defensive towers such as the Torre del Oro, a multi-functional tower of the Guadalquivir river; wall sections in the Macarena neighbourhood from the city's gates Arco de la Macarena to the Puerta de Córdoba (Morales, 2013), in the Alcázar, Jardines del Valle, among others.

Besides, Seville has hosted international events such as the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929, a congregation of the "old metropolis" (Spain) and its former colonies (currently countries in America) to underline the common cultural elements between the two parties (Souto, 2007, 2009). Likewise, the Universal Exposition of Seville (Expo '92) took place in the city during the celebration of the fifth centenary of the discovery of America. The aim was to promote the image of modernisation of the country, and to boost both the regional development and the tourism of Andalusia (Marchena Gómez, 1992). As a result, numerous buildings, parks and infrastructure were created prior to and/or because of the 1929 and 1992 expositions. Many of those buildings are currently being used as consulates, university offices and research centres and institutional offices. However, there are other buildings and public spaces that show clear signs of neglect, as if they were "slowly being reclaimed by nature" (Morrison, 2015).

Regarding the mobility, great investment has been made in the construction of the underground (in the historic city centre) and the tram, whose rails were installed just 6 metres from the cathedral. On the one hand, this could be considered invasive, a visual impact and loss of identity in the area. Further, it can be deemed necessary or convenient, given the pedestrianisation process happening in the historic city centre in the latest decades (Campo Tejedor *et al.*, 2009) to keep (most, not all) motorised vehicles away from the city centre. In this way, the local government (Gerencia de Urbanismo de Sevilla–Ayuntamiento de Sevilla, 2017) designed bicycle tours to visit the aforementioned heritage assets and the main landmarks of the city. A bicycle rental is available with more than 260 parking areas scattered throughout the city, including the historic city centre, and 2,600 bicycles, which evidences the clear stance of the City Council towards sustainable mobility.

Finally, mention should be made of the insertion of modern architecture in a city centre with a clear heritage character. This is the case of Metropol Parasol in the Plaza de la Encarnación, in the core of the city centre, a building designed by the architect Jürgen Mayer and inaugurated in 2011 (Plate 1).

This building – or monument – is said to be the largest wooden structure in the world, and is nowadays both a tourist attraction in the city and a place where economic (market, bars and restaurants), cultural (antiquarium, an archaeological museum) and recreational activities take



Plate 1.
Metropol Parasol in the
Plaza de la
Encarnación in
Seville, Spain

place (No Solo Una Idea, 2016). Again, the difficult balance between (1) the visual impact and loss of identity and (2) the socio-economic and cultural outcome of a transformation in a city centre arises.

3. Methodology

In order to analyse the implementation of the transformation phases in Old Najaf, the SWOT technique was used to identify and organise the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to the examined case study of the city's historic centre. At the first stage, all available data (photographs, maps, documents and reports) were collected from different sources, including previous studies by governmental institutions, departments and agencies. Among these sources, governmental documentation such as the Najaf Directorate of Urban Planning was relevant, since it provided evidence to understand how the planning conditions of traditional public spaces in Najaf City have changed. These previous studies attempted to update the master plan of Najaf City in co-ordination with the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works and the General Directorate of Physical Planning. Second, the data were organised based on the historic developments and important changes. Ultimately, the SWOT analysis was used for each identified phase in the morphological evolution of the historic centre. This can offer an opportunity to observe the implications of urban planning practices in Old Najaf from the mid-20th century to the present day. In order to identify the well-organised urban design practises and appropriate strategies, the implemented studies and projects were examined by the four factors of the SWOT analysis.

4. Modern urban design studies: projects in Old Najaf

Since the last century, Najaf's historic city centre has been under a steady case of urban additions, but no determined attempt has been made to develop it with a consideration to the city's character and identity. For example, first, the demolition of the wall by the municipal authorities in 1938, and second, the construction of the city's streets in 1954, altered the city's urban space and changed the historical areas on both sides of the road. Changes were also made to the surroundings of the shrine by deconstructing the original design pattern; this is evidenced by the building separation and the external walls as a front to the shrine (Al-Dhalmy, 2016). For reasons of profitability and commercial land use, development proposals in the city allocated the Visitors' City and the Tourism Services Centre to the traditional urban fabric (pattern). This implied the removal of large urban areas to meet the spatial requirements of the two projects in the neighbourhoods of Al-Amara and Al-Howaish. In addition, the design phases of the proposed architectural project in the centre of the traditional City of Najaf were completed, proposing the transformation of this area for visitors to the Sahn and the sacred shrine. In this way, a large market area around the sacred shrine could also be made available, as well as a wide open Sahan on the side of the Imam Ali Square.

4.1 Doxiadis Foundation's study (1956)

The Doxiadis Foundation's study did not reflect the awareness of the nature of the traditional planning, the urban fabric, the heritage and the importance of Old Najaf. Notwithstanding, it is worth noting that the poor environmental conditions resulting from a high population density, overcrowding and lack of services and social activities can only be improved by implementing radical measures such as removing at least 50% of the dwellings and improving the rest of the city (Directorate of Urban Planning–Najaf Governorate, 1958). As a result, the study did not address the development of preservation policies for buildings with great historical and architectural values, and for the city's urban character; no suggestions were made to solve traffic problems or the flow of pedestrians and visitors.

4.2 Study by the Urban Planning Authority (1979)

In 1979, the second master plan of the City of Najaf was prepared by the Urban Planning Authority (Department of Planning–Municipality of Najaf, 1979), when the first design

proposals prepared by Doxiadis were transferred to the planning authority. As in the Doxiadis Foundation's study (Doxiadis Associates, 1956), the report by the Urban Planning Authority did not solve the problems of not considering the character of tradition urban fabrics including the spatial configuration and physical structures; in addition, it did not take the preservation requirements into account. However, Doxiadis proposed several projects for the redevelopment of sections of the historic city centre. These projects were: the shopping centre (commercial area), the Visitors' City, the Tourist Services Centre, the expansion project of the course of the Sahn in four directions and a tourist city in the low sea of Najaf. Both the Doxiadis Foundation's study and the 1979 supplementary study by the Planning Authority reveal that these bodies were not aware of the heritage values of Old Najaf. Under this premise, the movement of visitors and the increase in their number, together with the problems of deterioration of the state of construction of the archaeological sites, resulted in the demolition of archaeological sites, the expansion of streets and the creation of new spaces.

4.3 Study by the General Directorate of Urban Planning (1986)

The Directorate of Urban Planning of Najaf prepared a study to develop the city, including the historic centre, its new neighbourhoods and the Cemetery area. The study included aspects of distinctive characteristics of the city and its basic urban elements, which should be preserved due to their heritage values. The most prominent of these is the hegemony of the Holy Shrine over the formation of the city, the preservation of buildings of architectural and historical value and the importance of movement and access to the city. The study also highlighted the need to amend the basic design of the city form to fit the proposed development projects in the city, which should be connected with each other and with the structure of the city in general (General Directorate of Urban Planning–Municipality of Najaf, 1986). However, the study implied major changes in the city, such as the expansion of the 60-m-long Sahan course, which led to the removal of approximately 40 m of the length of the main market axis. There was also further removal and alteration of the traditional urban pattern, and the creation of competing urban spaces, especially the space of the Sahan, leading to the weakening of its influence and dominance. Thus, the study contradicted its first approach, which emphasised the city's traditional characteristics and preservation of the identity of the Arab-Islamic city, manifested by narrow zigzag alleys, low-rise buildings, compacted organic dwellings and dense traditional bazaars (Hakim, 1994, 2007, 2013).

4.4 Town of visitors' project

Development projects with effects on the city form have been continuously implemented. One of the projects aims at creating a wide middle space – along with the area designated for the establishment of the Visitors' Town – to connect the Holy Shrine with the lower part of the Najaf Sea. The project consists of two rows of buildings in the form of open boxes with central medallions which serve as unified columns with pillars and in a pivotal direction towards the sanctuary. These abstract forms are not original to the heritage and values of Old Najaf. It is also worth paying attention to the design of partitioning the square bases of the central shed into three upward columns, forming forms that carry all the tents that should embody the past. In this sense, nothing has been done with the shapes of tents in the City of Najaf and the Holy Shrine. The great contrast with the nature of the traditional urban fabric has given the shrine a peculiar design touch similar to the style of treating monuments or churches in Europe. Moreover, this large space will reduce and weaken the dominance of the space of the Sahan on the spatial structure of the city. The hotels are also strange in their design, embedded in their construction. The projected high-rise building blocks differ from the city's traditional skyline and weaken both the shrine's hegemony of its dome and sanctuary, and its economic aim; thus, the ancient area of Old Najaf may become a place for material acquisition and commercial conflict (Department of Projects–Municipality of Najaf, 2005).

This project evolved at the expense of removing part of the traditional fabric and some houses and heritage sites. The project also affected the city's traditional fabric, as seen in:

- (1) The construction of building blocks in the inner city;
- (2) The demolition of the area adjacent to the Holy Shrine by Al-Amara neighbourhood and opposite the Al-Howaish neighbourhood;
- (3) The opening of a large outlet inside the old city; and
- (4) The removal of the al-Amara neighbourhood to build the Town of Visitors, for which around 50 schools, a mosque and a cemetery were demolished.

Dar al-Mulla, Dar al-Moussawi and al-Khalili School, among other assets, were part of the archaeological and the cultural heritage of the city. Besides, the Holy Shrine used to be the centre of the physical composition of Old Najaf, and because of the demolition of adjacent areas as described above, the sanctuary is nowadays isolated from the rest of buildings (Figure 4); therefore, it has been separated from the traditional urban fabrics, and has lost part of its historical, archaeological and humanitarian values.

4.5 Project proposal for the Najaf's city centre and the expansion of the Holy Shrine

The architect's (Al-Ansari, 2007) study emphasises the importance of preserving the city's architectural features and urban fabric, since they convey its conservative identity. The economic importance of the old market (the big market) is highlighted, as it is considered the core of the main pedestrian traffic leading to the Holy Shrine, a distinctive sign of Najaf. The project considered the possibility of changing the features of the city whenever needed, as long as it led to good intentions that will develop the city's absorptive capacity of visitors (which is the main problem in the opinion of the consultant). The project (Al-Ansari, 2007) proposed to revive the historical character of the heritage city centre through the following objectives:

- (1) Preserving as much as possible the historical and religious monuments of Old Najaf;
- (2) Emphasising the integration and interdependence of the proposed new buildings with the Holy Shrine;
- (3) Ensuring continuity of pedestrian movement towards the Shrine of Salouh; and
- (4) Emphasising the cultural and religious identity of the city and reviving its original heritage.

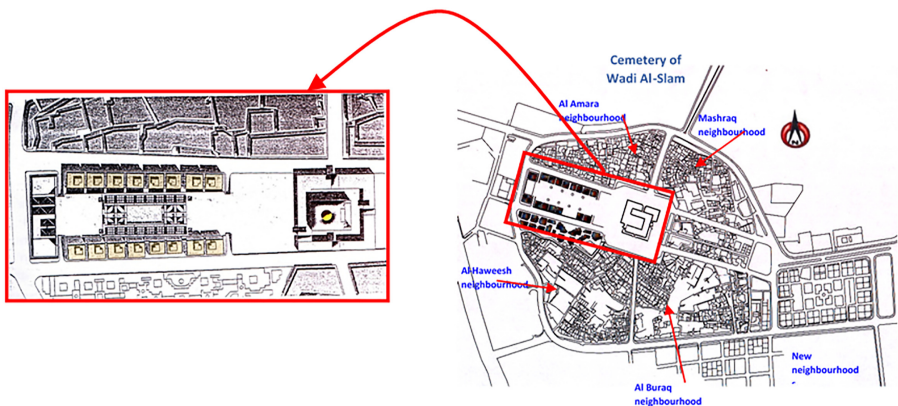
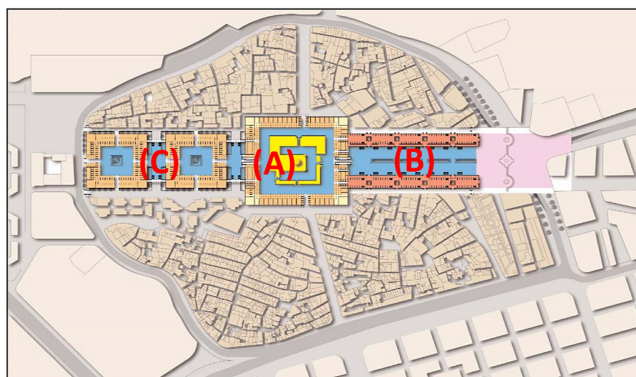


Figure 4.
The Visitors' Town of
Old Najaf

Source(s): Municipality of Najaf



Source(s): Al-Ansari (2007)

Figure 5.
The design proposal
for the historic city
centre of Najaf: (a) Holy
Shrine area; (b) Great
Market area; (c)
Visitors' Town

The project established the subdivision of Old Najaf's central area into the following sectors (Figure 5):

- (1) Around the Holy Shrine;
- (2) Between Imam Al-Sadiq Street and Imam Zayn Al-Abidin, which extends from Imam Ali Square or Al-Midan Square to the Holy Shrine, also including the Grand Market; and
- (3) The area extending from the Holy Shrine to the area overlooking the Sea of Najaf (now called the Visitors' City or the former area of Amara).

Given the large number of visitors arriving daily to this city – this was explained in the Introduction section –, the project proposes to build two large markets adjacent to the courtyard (one market on each side) extending from Imam Ali Square to the Holy Shrine, once the existing large market is demolished. As explained above, concerning the Imam Ali Shrine, the urban transformations in Old Najaf at the end of the 20th century, based on new concrete blocks and modern architecture, have reduced the temple's dominant position.

From all the above, Table 1 shows the SWOT analysis of the different studies and projects in Old Najaf, considering key areas of the city and the implications of the urban transformations occurred.

5. Discussion

The study of the draft development proposal raises several points that need to be discussed.

5.1 Development of historic city centres

There are many lessons, methods and tactics which can be drawn from the experience of urban development conducted in the Spanish historic centres addressed in this paper, *Donostia-San Sebastián* and *Seville*. These can be analysed against Old Najaf's development processes over time into similarities and differences.

Table 1.
SWOT analysis of
urban studies and
projects in Old Najaf

Phases	Areas	Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)	SWOT factors	Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)	
Modern Urban Design Studies of Old Najaf	Holy Shrine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being a dominant landmark - Preserving historical places and landmarks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of user services 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Future urban development - Shrine's infrastructure upgrades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changes in the Shrine's form - Impact on the spatial hierarchy of the Shrine and its vicinity 	
	Great Market Area		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No solutions for traditional infrastructure 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase connections with main roads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impact on the dense traditional urban fabric by removing some parts - The character of organic urban fabrics is impacted 	
	Town of Visitors						
Study by the Urban Planning Authority (1979)	Holy Shrine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did not change the Shrine's form and structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuous impacts on the surrounding traditional areas - Increasing the awareness of the Imam Ali Shrine 				
	Great Market Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commercial cultural activities are emphasised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of preserving vicinity traditional areas 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formation of new urban places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuous character loss of tradition urban fabrics - Deterioration of traditional building conditions 	
Study by the General Directorate of Urban Planning (1986)	Town of Visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proposing a town for visitors - Controlling the transportation modes (managing the flow of people and goods) 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diverse modes of movement - Increase of road options for pedestrian routes - Increase of access points between the core and the city 		
	Holy Shrine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remaining as a dominant landmark - Developing the cemetery area - Preserving historic landmarks and architectural elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impact on the Shrine form by expanding the 60-m-long Sahlan course 				
	Great Market Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating new places to accommodate new users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Removing approx. 40 m of the Great Market axis' length - Limited areas left to the traditional housing clusters 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New user flows - Formation of new activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loss of both local character and identity - Reducing local industries 	
	Town of Visitors						

(continued)

Phases	Areas	Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)	SWOT factors	Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)
Town of Visitors project	Holy Shrine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forming a strong axis for the Shrine - Shaping new ritual spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decrease of its dominance - Loss of surrounding traditional areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing the connections of the historic centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New forms of hotels 	
	Great Market Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proximity to transportation services - Proximity to the Sea Najaf's area - Regular area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High-rise building blocks - Commercial interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connections to traditional parts - More free areas for new investments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impact on the density - Change of the character of urban life - Dominance of commercial interaction 	
Project proposal for the Najaf's City centre and the expansion of the Holy Shrine	Holy Shrine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Directional movement towards the Shrine - Extending from Imam Ali Square to the Holy Shrine - Design of inside inclusive spaces (courts) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decrease of the dominance of the Shrine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Directional access to the Shrine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 	
	Great Market Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orientation-based development - Proximity to transportation services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The greatest loss of traditional historic fabrics - Emphasising the separation of activities by a linear arrangement - Loss of traditional shops and spaces - Reduction of human-scale in place - Limitation of route choices - Accommodating more local industries - Rise of advantages of locals' income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possible new socio-cultural interactions - Directional spatial organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changes to socio-economic activities - Increase of the separation between the two historic centre parts 	
Town of Visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase of the visitors' capacity - Creation of new activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of different types of commercial activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Turning the rest of traditional blocks into modern ones - Attracting more groups of visitors 	

Table 1.

(1) *Similarities*

- The character of the local architectural identity of historic façades, traditional buildings and urban clusters has been replaced by the international character, models and practises, which impacted both the city's heritage and people.
- Many of residential clusters have evolved into commercial and/or mixed-use activities places, in particular those that are located around the main boulevards.
- Most of the local traditional commercial activities have turned to the tourist-oriented commercial activities.
- The increase of traffic congestions were found in the traditional urban fabric instead of occurring in the public urban spaces.
- Visual impact of modern architecture adjacent to heritage, landmarks and religious buildings.

(2) *Differences*

The greater extent of the removal and demolition of heritage assets in Old Najaf against the Spanish cases can be highlighted. This has impacted the Imam Ali Shrine, a sanctuary that entails spiritual values and virtues.

5.2 *Regarding the Holy Shrine*

The proposal of creating a large space surrounding the Holy Shrine on its four sides (60 m from each side) has been next complemented with new buildings that reproduce the features of the main Sahn (Figure 6). As a result, the hegemony of the Holy Shrine may be affected, since its architectural characteristics lose their uniqueness and historical credibility in this new context of modern buildings.

Concerning the proposed courtyard from Imam Ali Square to the Holy Shrine, a new roof has been designed for the wide corridor to protect the visitors in winter and summer, and, according to the study, to offer services to visitors. The ability of this area to meet the needs of 3–4 million visitors is debatable. Furthermore, these modern solar protection systems are in conflict with the traditional identity of the City of Najaf, where the previous urban fabric (before the opening of the large area surrounding the sanctuary) provided solar protection by the presence of adjacent buildings.

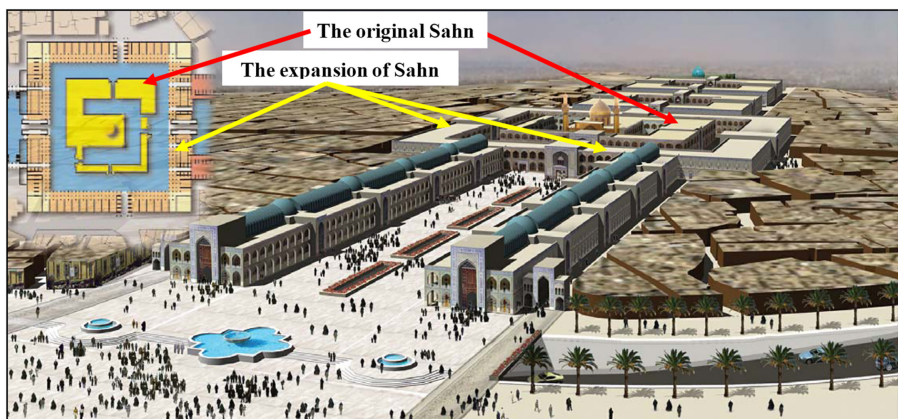


Figure 6.
Built areas of the
proposed Sahn

Source(s): Authors based on Al-Ansari (2007)

5.3 About the proposed new markets in the city centre

The study indicated that one of the important reasons for removing the Great Market is the distortion that occurred in the last two decades of the last century. However, the existence of the market in this place is not the result of recent urban planning; archaeological investigations revealed its emergence over 200 years ago. In this way, the current status of the market shows its characteristics, history and identity. An integral refurbishment of the site could be undertaken instead of its demolition to build two new markets that will not achieve Najaf city's identity and distinctive architecture. The objective of this planned development process is to remove the whole area. This will change the urban nature of the city and the pattern of movement within it, which started since the destruction of the perimeter wall and the tarmacking of streets inside the city.

As in the case of the expansion of the Sahn, the creation of these two three-storey markets in the area will affect the predominant role of the two-floor Holy Shrine in this new complex in Old Najaf. From the point of view of the entrances to these modern markets, it can be seen that their height is similar to that of the dome of the Holy Shrine and to the height of the courtyard's wall of the current shrine. Thus, only from the area of the longitudinal axis can the visitor see the Dome of the Imam and the light, but from either side of the longitudinal axis nothing can be seen (Plate 2). Moreover, the repetitive architectural features of the new buildings will not preserve the uniqueness of the temple either.

5.4 Regarding the development of the visitors' city

The designers projected two large Sahns as an extension of the sacred shrine to the west. This proposal, aimed at emphasising the city's religious and human spirit, is also a way to restore part of the profile of the traditional fabric currently being jeopardised by the development projects that have materialised over time in the city. However, the design of these two Sahns is similar to that of the blocks built in the organic fabric, which is designed as an extension of the Holy Shrine. Besides, the Sahns are exaggerated in size and shape, thus losing, again, the hegemony of the shrine in the ancient city (Figure 7).

The removal of large parts of the urban fabrics of the historic city centre of Najaf under various pretexts has led to the loss of numerous architectural figures and symbols with historical values and heritage monuments, or has isolated them from their surroundings. Also, misguided practices of the design and planning authorities have played a major role in the negative impact on the urban fabric, the disintegration of its unity and the deterioration of its characteristics.

5.5 Research limitations

The limitations of this research are threefold. From the beginning, the analysis was limited to study the case of Old Najaf; this makes it necessary to apply the same approach to other case



Source(s): Authors

Plate 2.
Perspectives of the new
complex; The proposed
buildings with the
Shrine

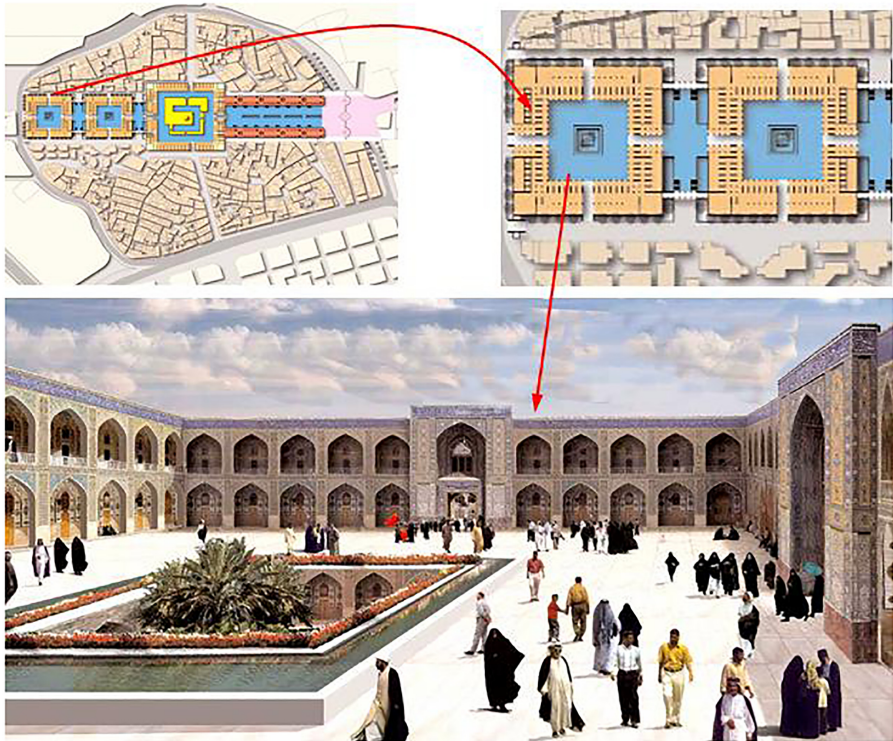


Figure 7.
The proposed Sahns
located in Al-Amara
neighbourhood; The
Town of visitors

Source(s): Authors based on Al-Ansari (2007)

studies so that the findings in this research can be compared against a wider sample. Also, the scope of the exploration was limited to the urban places, landmarks and the implementation processes of the master plans. In future, other urban systems, such as transportation modes, socio-economic and environmental indicators, should be considered in the analysis. Finally, conclusions were derived based on qualitative descriptions and illustrations; consequently, greater efforts should be made to implement quantitative methods and techniques for future research directions.

6. Conclusion

The development of historic centres has benefited from the socio-cultural and architectural heritage yet they have faced many relevant challenges that have led to change. As seen in the cases of Donostia-San Sebastián and Seville in Spain, Europe, urban transformations in historic city centres are frequent. Whether due to economic interest or modernisation practices, it is not always easy to achieve a balance that takes into account the needs of citizens, the economic potential, the sustainable development of the city and the preservation of heritage assets and historic urban characteristics.

In this research, the SWOT analysis has been adopted to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats based on the three main areas (the Imam Ali Holy Shrine, Great Market Area and Visitors' Town). This approach was also useful to evaluate how the five examined studies and projects addressed the urban transformations of the historic centre. In Old Najaf, the historic centre of Najaf City, diverse studies and development projects have been implemented over

time. This has led to important changes in the urban fabric, thus providing the city and the visitors with new public spaces and services to meet the demands of the seasonal pilgrimage to the city. However, these urban transformations have also entailed diverse losses in the city, such as those in the traditional urban pattern and in the heritage assets because of the massive demolition of key areas. In this sense, mention should be made to the new configuration of the Old City as a whole.

The opening of large areas in the Holy Shrine sector, the former Great Market and the Town of Visitors has divided Old Najaf into two parts. As a result of that division, the surrounding traditional areas have been isolated, which blurs the city's character. The loss of the ancient interconnection within the urban framework of the city has led to the loss of much of its historical importance, thus leading to a situation that had never been designed. The framework has been replaced in a short time by external patterns that did not fit the traditional form and content (but which could fit other cities in the world), thus threatening the urban transformation of the ancient city into distorted copies of other cities. Moreover, the proposed new Sahn and markets will affect the dominance of the Holy Shrine and the historical dimension and local identity. This is mainly because the number, height and design of those buildings, as well as for their location in large public spaces, areas that were not originally designed for those purposes.

The local administration should therefore make greater efforts to adopt effective measures through urban planning, regulations and policies to control the transformations in the urban fabric of the Old City. The ability to control the city's design development and changes is key to prevent its pattern decay and even the final evacuation of its people. The authors of this paper consider that the development projects should be aimed at increasing the cohesion of the already torn urban fabric of the historic city centre, in such a way that both the unique, distinctive characteristics and the identity of the Imam Ali Holy Shrine and surrounding heritage areas are preserved. This becomes essential in the Islamic culture, especially since the physical structure of the City of Najaf is mainly determined by the influence of religious, spiritual and moral principles and values.

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