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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Role of bazaars as a unifying factor in traditional cities of Iran: The Isfahan bazaar



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## Abstract

A city is a vital organism that lives and grows like other organisms. Therefore, implementing development plans that would provide a sense of unity and integration in relation to the city as a whole is necessary. Traditional Iranian architecture is full of samples evolved during the course of Iranian history that can serve as architectural paragons of the city. In Iran's traditional cities, a sense of unity exists in various urban areas. The traditional city of Isfahan is one of the most valuable samples and was selected as the case study in this research. Accordingly, the most important questions of this research are as follows: (1) What is the role of bazaars in creating a sense of unity in the traditional cities of Iran? (2) How do bazaars play out their role in the integration of these cities? This research focuses on the concept of a "traditional city" to determine the role of bazaars in such cities. The results show that bazaars are crucial in giving a sense of integrity to the concept of a traditional Iranian city. Bazaars provide cohesion among the different parts of cities, such as residential areas, as well as socio-political and trade centers. This condition means that traditional bazaars play two important roles in traditional cities: (1) they interconnect the different parts of the

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city's physical structure; and (2) the crucial role of bazaars in a city's social and cultural structure brings about unity among the citizens in the city. Bazaars as a unifying element connect the main urban functions and guarantee the city's economic and social life.

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## 1. Introduction

"In the early 1970s, [Odum \(1971, 1973\)](#) proposed that flows of energy and materials in societies can be analyzed in the same way they are analyzed in organisms and ecosystems" ([Samaniego and Moses, 2008](#)). As such, a city is a vital organism that lives and grows like other organisms, and its life is dependent on a series of factors. A city that has political aspects might be able to change the destination of a nation. Hence, political systems and knowledgeable management are needed. A city is also a center for research about human behavior enabling researchers to determine the suitable culture for the next generation. From a city manager's viewpoint, cities and urban places can be regarded as valuable technological, artistic, cultural, and social achievements in different centuries ([Danesh and Tayyebi, 2011](#)). The role of cities has been increasingly considered as a critical part of the global economy ([Fanni, 2006](#)). Cities and residential complexes are the most visible manifestations of human culture that provide perceptual and objective spaces for presenting the most intellectual and subjective components of life ([Danesh, 2010](#)). Thus, scholars and researchers believe that a city develops and define its stages with phrases such as "the shaping and appearance stage", "transformation stage", and "the emergence of a new concept of city development". This observation shows that all of the city's attributes somehow have analogs in living organisms. Therefore, a city is an organism that needs an underlying structure, such as a backbone, to secure its different elements around itself and enable their natural and logical development.

Towns, cities, and residential areas are the most prominent manifestations of human culture ([Jamalinezhad et al., 2012](#)). Georges Marcas described the physical organization of city markets as ordered in a certain hierarchy that is only partly accidental ([Abu-Lughod, 1987](#)). A bazaar is one characteristic factor of cities in different historical periods, which makes a city's social and economic life a sign of progress or backwardness. Sometimes, a bazaar is the center of protest and riots against the government or political system and determines the destiny of a society. Since the early days of civilization and urbanization in Iran, bazaars have been present in cities and have become a factor in the exchange of culture between civilizations. This scenario means that societies develop cultural exchange by the direct exchange of goods ([Masoudi Nejad, 2007](#)). Bazaars, as the backbone and economic heart of Iranian cities, include primary and secondary linear circulation spaces called "Rasteh", open and closed spaces, indoor and outdoor spaces, beautiful arches, skylights, and karbandies along the fixed axis or multiple branches ([Rajabi and Sefahan, 2009](#)). The role of bazaars in Iranian cities is very important; Isfahan is a historical city that has a particular role in Iran's history, whose

bazaar was formed over the centuries ([Mojtahedzadeh, 2012](#)). The study of the Isfahan bazaar can show all structural principles of historical Iranian bazaars. It reveals a bazaar's role as an institutor and integration factor in the different periods of Iranian history. The organization of Iranian traditional cities has changed during the different eras. In the Median era, a city was a fortress on a hill or other strategic points. In the Achaemenid era, a city became a trade center for the first time. The general plan of a city was a circle in the Parthian era. In the 7th century and the Islamic ages, a mosque was the main urban space, and the city was formed around it. In the Safavid era, a city was changed to an agricultural, industrial, and commercial center that the government supervised.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Bazaar structure in an Iranian city

A bazaar's role in a typical Iranian city is very important. The word "bazaar" is an old Persian word that is now an integral part of Iranian culture. The word has a very long history, and historical documents indicate that the concept of a bazaar in Iranian towns and cities dates back to 3000 B.C ([Kermani and Luiten, 2009](#)). The study of urban history reveals that a variety of factors have influenced the development of ancient cities. The economy has always been one of the most important factors in urban growth. In a traditional city in Iran, the bazaar has been a place for the economic, social, political, cultural, and civic activities of people ([Moosavi, 2005](#)). In fact, a bazaar is one of the key elements of spatial organization in Iranian cities; the main body of the city cannot be defined without the existence of a bazaar. In many historical cities, the main transport routes are established in relationship to the main "Bazaar Rasteh"; hence, historical bazaars are in the form and layout of cities ([Pourjafar et al., 2013](#)). A crucial idea states that the structure of traditional cities in Iran is based on its bazaar's economic and political factors. From early Iranian urbanization to the present time, different factors have been crucial in the formation of traditional cities. This composition has had its own form in each period, and the governors complete this combination to show their strength and wisdom. Some scholars believe that bazaars are the main core of Islamic cities; others consider the "Jame mosque" as the city center; whereas some believe both are Islamic city concepts ([Encyclopedia Islamica, 2012](#)). The most prevalent depiction of an Iranian bazaar privileges generalized cultural factors. This long-standing literature views bazaars as constituting a holistic way of life encompassing economic forms, political sensibilities, social relations, and various ideological persuasions, all of which fall under the rubric traditional ([Keshavarzian, 2009](#)). Iranian markets in urban

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