

The influence of commercial modernization on public life in Iranian bazaars

Case study: Tabriz bazaar

Solmaz Yadollahi

Silke Weidner, Prof. Dr.

Urban Management chair

BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg

Cottbus, Germany

Correspondent author: Solmaz.yadollahi@gmail.com

Abstract:

As multifunctional commercial centers, bazaars have been central public places in Iranian commercial cities at least until the mid-twentieth century. Scholars who have researched Iranian bazaars generally agree that due to the complex and inter-effective political, ideological and commercial factors, Iranian bazaars have not been able to develop with the pace of commercial and urban modernization. This paper reflects on the influence of commercial modernization on the function of bazaars as public places. The technological and industrial developments in Iran, particularly since twentieth century, have introduced a new order of commercial relations and new methods of commerce to the Iranian market. The international commercial relations in twentieth century have changed the balance of economic power among merchants and have influenced the function of Iranian bazaars. Furthermore, commercial and urban development modernization has affected the land use zoning policies in Iranian cities. Being influenced by these phenomena, the social relations among members of the bazaar community and the social groups (customers) attracted to the bazaars for retail services have changed. All in all, because the majority of publics who go to the bazaars are interested in retail services, the nature of public life in bazaars has changed as a result of modernization of commerce. Through literature review, this paper explains the effect of commercial and urban planning modernization on the function of Iranian bazaars as public places, since the beginning of twentieth century. Then, findings of an ethnographic research in Tabriz bazaar will be presented to show the current challenges of an Iranian historical bazaar in hosting contemporary public life.

Keywords: Iranian bazaar, Tabriz, commercial modernization, public space, urban development, retail.

1 Iranian bazaar

Through overlapping the viewpoints of scholars such as Ashraf (1989), Soltanzadeh (1986), Bonine (1989), we attempted to present a conceptual model for Iranian bazaar¹, which shows the characteristics of

¹ The literature on bazaar typologies in Iran suggests that having developed complex social and spatial networks, bazaars in commercial cities illustrate the advanced social-spatial structure of Iranian bazaar in a general sense, and their common characteristics represent the raw model of Iranian bazaar (Falamaki, 2005 and Soltanzade, 1986) Although this research does not generalize its empirical results on Tabriz bazaar to all Iranian bazaars, the results can be useful for similar bazaars because Tabriz bazaar is an important example of the Iranian large bazaars in commercial cities.

bazaar in Iranian commercial city before modernization. On the one hand, bazaar is a social network, being constantly regulated by socio-economic norms through time. On the other hand, it is a spatial network being constantly re-structured according to socio-economic relations. In fact, the concept of bazaar is not imaginable without considering its social and spatial networks as a dynamic whole.

In the commercial city, bazaar is the central space for socio-economic activities. Its functional and physical centrality in the city has turned it to a central place for communication. Therefore, the integrated network of open and accessible spaces of the bazaar (as a whole) forms the main public place in the commercial city. However, bazaar is different from other public places of the city which are managed by the government. It is mainly owned, managed and developed by the bazaari community². Obviously, as a commercial centre, bazaar needs to be open and accessible to regular publics to keep its commercial and retail activities going.

Having the conceptual definition of Iranian bazaar in mind, this paper discusses how the modernization in commerce and urban planning has affected the public life in Iranian bazaars. This discussion is based upon related literature and our empirical findings in Tabriz bazaar.

2 Bazaar-city duality and the problem of isolation process

Many studies on contemporary bazaars, point out the notion of old-new and traditional- modern *duality* in the bazaar-city relationship in Iran³. They agree that this duality is isolating the old, traditional bazaar from the constantly modernizing city.

In general, the reviewed authors have three assumptions about causes of the mentioned duality and the process of bazaar-city isolation. The duality has been viewed in terms of *ideological* (religious) tendencies and *political* orientations of bazaaris, as well as *commercial* (and technological) modernization. Firstly, it is assumed that bazaaris are traditional and attached to religious conservative beliefs comparing to other social groups in Iran (Ashraf 1989 and Bonine 1989). Secondly, it is believed that since the late 19th century, bazaar is considered a powerful economic organization and a threat to the central power of the state. Therefore, the states have weakened the bazaar through economic policies (Ashraf 1989, [Katouzian 2009](#) and Keshavarzian 2007). Thirdly, it is believed that being weakened by the states, bazaars have not been able to develop with the pace of technological development and modernization of commerce. They are viewed as commercial centres mainly following the traditional ways of trade (Keshavarzian 2007 and Ashraf 1989). In this paper, we discuss mainly about the third assumption and how it has affected the function of bazaar as public place.

3 Commercial modernization and its effect on urban zoning

In early 20th century, the political and economic modernization of Iran started. Nevertheless, the major changes in commerce happened in 1960s, when the state began to control and centralize the commercial exchanges. The state's commercial and urban renewal projects in this era influenced bazaars in an inter-affective way.

The commercial modernization in Iran was enforced by the technological innovations making communication faster and easier. The modern transportation possibilities, telecommunication, and later, internet influenced the methods of commerce in Iran. Naturally, the amount of national and international commercial exchange in Iranian market was increased. In the traditional bazaars commercial exchanges

² As a result of constant commercial activities and social communication in bazaars, the bands of common economic interests connect those who work together under the bazaars' roofs. This community, known as the *bazaari community* forms a social entity in Iran (Ashraf 1989 and Keshavarzian 2007)

³ It should be mentioned that here, the duality by itself is understood as a neutral situation which implies difference. The situation of bazaar gets problematic when this difference creates and enforces the process of bazaar-city isolation.

normally depend on a geographical location (bazaar area) and a specific period of time. Bazaars usually do not work on Fridays, and during the evening and night hours. Modern methods of commercial exchange introduced a time and space independency that is not offered by traditional bazaars.

Although Iran is not far advanced in e-commerce or telemarketing, policies of transformation to modern commerce is being increasingly encouraged and implemented by the Iranian government. Actually, the signs of change are seen in recent administrative regulations and laws passed to facilitate and enforce modern methods of commerce⁴. So, we should expect future impacts of modern commerce on bazaars.

This expansion of international commercial relations and the increase in the volume of exchanges have changed the balance of economic power among the bazaars in different cities, and also among the merchants in individual bazaars.

As Keshavarzian (2007) explains, the globalization of economic trends in Iran resulted in *delocalization* of the commercial networks, and changed the terms of trade in bazaars. He states that the new order in commercial relations increased the instability of exchange and introduced new actors to the traditional bazaars. These trends have put members of bazaar community in a competitive ambiance, and have damaged their traditional solidarity which kept bazaar integrated for centuries. Ashraf (1989) also, states that the competitive modern trade has caused inequality among the merchants in bazaars. As he explains, those who were involved in export businesses became remarkably wealthier than others who dealt with local trade. In the recent decades (because the market in Iran highly depends on the state organizations) those bazaaris who are politically in better terms with the state enjoy higher chances in commerce (Keshavarzian 2007). Focusing on Tehran bazaar, Keshavarzian (2007) concludes that the *publicity* in bazaar has been turned into *secrecy* as a result of political, commercial, and technological changes in the last century.

Commercial modernization and its interaction with modern urban planning have also influenced the interest of groups of urban publics in the retail services in bazaars.

After modernization and centralization projects, the bazaar of Tehran started serving as a strategic trade centre in local, national, and international scales (Ashraf 1989), and large provincial bazaars such as bazaars in Tabriz and Esfahan, maintained their commercial role in a secondary level. This increase of the trade volume in large bazaars was, of course, at the expense of declining the economic power of smaller provincial bazaars and putting too much pressure on the mentioned large and important bazaars. The common problem which has been reported by many researchers is the over exploitation of the large bazaars for commercial purposes.

Keshavarzian (2007) and Ashraf (1989) discuss the notion of *relocation of the retail activities* in Iranian cities from the bazaars to the modern streets, and the *transition* of the function of Iranian bazaars. As they explain, after modernization and change in production and distribution activities, the increased volume of trade could not be facilitated by the physical structure of the old bazaars.

Although some bazaaris started to move away from the bazaar area, most of the merchants and retailers maintained their shops and offices inside the bazaar and central city (Keshavarzian 2007). On the other hand, large bazaars started to turn into centres of mostly wholesale trade providing the goods for the retail centres and shops in streets all around the cities (Ashraf 1989 and Falamaki 2005). Consequently, the retail activities of bazaars relatively declined, and they became mostly wholesale centres and centres for small-scale workshops. Today, the consumers who used to go to bazaars on a daily basis choose to go to the new retail shops in streets, and people who run retail businesses in the streets go to wholesalers in the bazaar to provide the goods for their shops. In case of Tabriz and Tehran bazaars, also the retailers from the near cities and villages provide their products from the large bazaars (Bonine 1989, Asl-e Sarirai

⁴ According to the official reports prepared by the Deputy of Management at The Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade, Iran. Reports available at: <http://imp.mim.gov.ir/>

2007). This change in the social groups who use the bazaars has caused a decline in the quality of social life in bazaars.

The concentration of commerce in central city was simultaneous with the concentration of development investments in the newly built areas. As Falamaki (2005) puts it, the notion of *development of bazaars* was out of question, because the cities' capital was invested on the projects outside the old bazaar. The deterioration of buildings and infrastructures of the bazaar area started mainly because of commercial overexploitation without due maintenance. Consequently, the infrastructure of bazaar has become insufficient for the contemporary public life addressing all urban social groups.

The aforementioned changes also altered the balance of commercial-residential zones in Iranian commercial cities. Before the modern urbanism, bazari families and local people generally occupied neighbourhoods around the bazaars. Afterwards, when bazaar area adopted the character of urban wholesale and business centre, many of the residential areas around them turned into storehouses, offices and workshops (Falamaki 2005, Ashraf 1989, Bonine 1989). The decline in physical and infrastructural qualities of the bazaar and its immediate neighbourhoods resulted in the replacement of most of the local inhabitants with newcomers who involved in the business in that area, as well as social groups, mostly with low income. Therefore, wealthy social groups such as merchant families did not stay in the old residential areas near the bazaars. They moved to the newly developed neighbourhoods, to enjoy higher standards of wellbeing.

As Falamaki states, being "*shocked and confused*" by the modern urbanism, the old city now belonged to members of the lower social class or the ones he calls "*the surrenderers*" (Falamaki 2005: 159). This phenomenon created a duality in built and social structure of the old and new neighbourhoods in cities. Ashraf (1989) and Ehlers (1991) also mention the creation of this duality in social, economic and physical dimensions by viewing the old city traditional versus the modern new neighbourhoods.

This inter-related impact of commercial and urban planning modernization was another reason for the decline in public life in the bazaar. Due to this phenomenon, the central bazaar areas in large commercial cities are suffering from traffic jam and air pollution. Today, bazaars are not easily accessible to all potential customers around the city. In fact, through the mentioned process, bazaars did not lose their centrality in commerce. They gradually became central in a different sense, in a destructive sense.

4 Tabriz bazaar

Tabriz bazaar is located in Eastern Azerbaijan province in North West of Iran. It was inscribed on the World heritage list in 2010. The reason for selecting it as the case study is that it is the largest, socially active covered bazaar in Iran (ICHHTO 2009). According to Tabriz's master plan, Tabriz bazaar is located in the historic central Tabriz that is about 3% of the total city area, and is where 50% of money exchange of Tabriz is done (RUDOEA 2010). As suggested by the master plan document, most of residents of the central city are involved in retail and small manufacturing businesses and transportation. Similar to other large bazaars like Tehran bazaar, the role of Tabriz bazaar as public place is affected by the process of city-bazaar isolation. The bazaar is located in the most crowded part of Tabriz, suffering from traffic problems, pollution and commercial over exploitation. According to the comparative analysis conducted by the architect R. Mohammadzadeh (2009), Tabriz bazaar is socially less desirable than a nearby commercial street, Tarbiat Street. Mohammadzadeh points out that the undesirability of the bazaar owes to it not being physically and functionally integrated with its surrounding urban fabric. Through behavioural observation and interviews, we attempted to present the current state of public spaces in Tabriz bazaar in meeting the expectations of different groups of citizens using them.



Fig. 1, Tabriz bazaar, the core zone of the bazaar (© National Cartographic Centre of Iran)

According to our quantitative surveys in 23-30 March 2013 and 27 March –2 April 2014, in one working hour (15.00-16.00 PM), about 1513 individuals pass one of the main entrances (E) of Tabriz bazaar (Fig. 1). From this number of people, 78.3% are male, 19.6% female, and 2.1% are Children. These figures indicate that Tabriz bazaar is not welcoming and attractive equally for the observed groups. According to our behavioural observations and semi-structured/open-ended interviews with 38 people⁵, the first reason for the mentioned figures is that normally men work in the bazaar and women are a minority group in bazaar community. Our findings suggest that bazaar is not a favourite public space and retail centre for women who do not live in central city, students, and in general the younger generation. The main factors that our interviewees mentioned were lack of infrastructures such as efficient washrooms and benches, lack of convenient public transportation, low quality of buildings (especially in northern bazaar), extreme crowdedness, and in some cases sexual harassment⁶. The group that prefer retail services outside the bazaar also stated that except for products such as had woven carpet, handmade shoes and grocery, bazaar's retailers do not offer goods that address their expectations. According to them, the prices are reasonable in the bazaar. What makes them to choose shopping outside the bazaar is that they can find more fashionable goods with a higher quality in modern shopping areas. It should be mentioned that the quality of buildings and infrastructures, and the quality of offered products, in southern (and wealthier) area of the bazaar used for carpet, textile and jewellery trade is remarkably higher than the northern areas. Naturally, the quality of public life is higher in southern part of the bazaar.

⁵ Including bazaaris, governmental authorities, and regular publics (March 2013 and March-April 2014)

⁶ Sexual harassment is a “form of sex discrimination that includes both verbal and nonverbal behaviors—such as wolf whistles, leers, winks, grabs, pinches, catcalls, and street remarks” (Lahsaeizadeh and Yousefinejad 2011:17).

5 Conclusion

As discussed in case of Tabriz bazaar, the centralization of commercial services in the old bazaars has led to problems in managing them as public spaces, and has turned them into commercial centres that fail to address needs of certain groups of public members. Retail attracts customers and acts as a catalyst for economic development of urban areas. However, our case study that views a commercial centre as a public place, shows that economic and social development of urban spaces have to be considered together in management and investment policies.

Viewing Iranian bazaar as urban heritage and as the economic centre of Iranian commercial cities, this paper argues that bazaar without the presence all public members is far away from its conceptual meaning. Therefore, sustainable enhancement of the economic and heritage values of bazaars depends on considering the promotion of their publicness.

With the growing tendency in Iran for using internet in commercial and social relations, the role and meaning of bazaars in the modern city is to be challenged in the coming decades. Approaching bazaars as historic public places where face-to-face interaction of public members is possible can be the solution for this functional and meaning crisis of Iranian bazaars in the near future.

References

Ashraf, A. (1989): BAZAR iii. Socioeconomic and Political Role, IRANICA encyclopedia Vol. IV, Fasc. 1. [Online] Available from: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bazar-iii>, [10 Dec. 2013].

Asl-e Sarirai, F. (2007): Investigation of anthropological features of Tabriz Bazaar, MA thesis. Azad Islamic university, school of social science, Central unit, Tehran.

Bonine, M (1989): BAZAR i. General, IRANICA encyclopedia, Vol. IV, Fasc. 1. [Online] Available from: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bazar-i>, [11 Apr. 2014].

Ehlers, E (1991): CITIES iv. Modern Urbanization and Modernization in Persia, IRANICA encyclopedia, Vol. V, Fasc. 6. [Online] Available from: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cities-iv>, [1 Feb. 2014].

Falamaki, M (2005): An essay on urban conservation “from Venice to Shiraz”, Tehran.

ICHHTO (2009): World Heritage nomination dossier of Tabriz Historical Bazaar Complex, Tehran.

[Katouzian, H. \(2009\) The Persians: ancient, mediaeval, and modern Iran, New Haven.](#)

Keshavarzian, A. (2007): Bazaar and State in Iran: The Politics of the Tehran Marketplace, Cambridge.

[Lahsaeizadeh, A., Yousefinejad, E. \(2011\): Social Aspects of Women’s Experiences of Sexual Harassment, in Public Places in Iran. In: Sexuality & Culture, 2012, 16, pp.17–37.](#)

Mojammadzadeh, R., Fallahnejad, H. (2009): Comparative analysis of development of pedestrian zones in the old Bazaar and auto-free Tarbiat street. In: Honar-ha-ye Ziba Journal, 2009, 38, pp. 85-92.

RUDOEA (Roads and Urban Development Organization of Eastern Azerbaijan) (2010): Approved city master plans and historic city fabric detailed plans, Tabriz.

Soltanzadeh, H. (1986): An Introduction to Urban History and Urbanization in Iran, Tehran.