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URBAN REVITALIZATION IN KASHAN, IRAN:
AN EXPLANATION THROUGH ASSEMBLAGE THEORY

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ABSTRACT – After decades of gradual deterioration in the historical neighborhoods of Kashan, Iran, many historic buildings have now been repurposed as tourist facilities. This article examines the various actors and factors that have contributed to the urban revitalization of the neighborhoods in Kashan. Utilizing assemblage theory, this article constructs a relational, multiplex, and multiscalar explanation of the process of urban change. Rather than relying on the conventional understanding found in most existing gentrification studies, the aim of this study was to offer a localized interpretation of urban transformation processes. The research findings demonstrate that assemblages of human and non-human factors are shaping and reshaping the historical center of Kashan. Additionally, the findings suggest that the transformations of the historical neighborhoods of Kashan are not only due to the result of a single process but multiple urban processes occurring simultaneously within and outside the historical neighborhoods. These processes include heritage conservation (or requalification), incumbent upgrading, soft forms of revitalization, the initial stages of tourist gentrification, as well as suburbanization and urban sprawl. These dynamics are influenced by a variety of factors at political, economic, cultural, and legislative levels, operating at local, national, and global scales. We suggest that the assemblage approach can be effectively applied to study urban transformations in non-Western cities.

Keywords: Assemblage theory; urban revitalization; urban heritage; Kashan.

RESUMO – REVITALIZAÇÃO URBANA EM KASHAN, IRÃO: UMA EXPLICAÇÃO ATRAVÉS DA TEORIA DA ASSEMBLAGEM. Após décadas de deterioração gradual dos edifícios nos bairros históricos do centro da cidade de Kashan, Irão, muitos edifícios históricos foram agora reconvertidos em instalações turísticas. Este artigo examina os vários atores e fatores que contribuíram para a revitalização urbana dos bairros históricos de Kashan. Utilizando a teoria da assemblagem, este artigo constrói uma explicação relacional, múltipla e multiescalar do processo de mudança urbana. Em vez de depender da compreensão convencional encontrada na maioria dos estudos existentes sobre gentrificação, o objetivo deste estudo foi oferecer uma interpretação localizada dos processos de transformação urbana. Os resultados da pesquisa demonstram que assemblagens de fatores humanos e não humanos estão a moldar e a remoldar o centro histórico de Kashan. Além disso, os resultados sugerem que as transformações dos bairros históricos de Kashan não são apenas o resultado de um único processo; em vez disso, múltiplos processos urbanos estão a ocorrer simultaneamente dentro e fora dos bairros históricos. Estes processos incluem a conservação do património (ou requalificação), a modernização dos incumbentes, formas suaves de revitalização, fases iniciais da gentrificação turística, bem como a suburbanização e a expansão urbana. Estas dinâmicas são influenciadas por uma variedade de fatores a níveis político, económico, cultural e de alterações legislativas, operando às escalas local, nacional e global. Sugerimos que a abordagem da assemblagem pode ser aplicada de forma eficaz para estudar transformações urbanas em cidades não ocidentais.

Palavras-chave: Teoria da assemblagem; revitalização urbana; património urbano; Kashan.

RESUMEN – REVITALIZACIÓN URBANA EN KASHAN, IRÁN: UNA EXPLICACIÓN A TRAVÉS DE LA TEORIA DEL ENSAMBLAJE. Después de décadas de deterioro gradual en los barrios históricos de Kashan, Irán, muchos edificios históricos han sido reconvertidos ahora en instalaciones turísticas. Este artículo examina los diversos actores y factores que han contribuido a la revitalización urbana de los barrios históricos de Kashan. Utilizando la teoría del ensamblaje, este artículo construye una explicación relacional, múltiple y multiescalar del proceso de cambio urbano. En lugar de depender de la comprensión convencional que se encuentra en la mayoría de los estudios existentes sobre gentrificación, el objetivo de este estudio fue ofrecer una interpretación localizada de los procesos de transformación urbana. Los hallazgos de la investigación

demuestran que los ensamblajes de factores humanos y no humanos están moldeando y remodelando el centro histórico de Kashan. Además, los hallazgos sugieren que las transformaciones de los barrios históricos de Kashan no son solo el resultado de un solo proceso, sino que múltiples procesos urbanos están ocurriendo simultáneamente dentro y fuera de los barrios históricos. Estos procesos incluyen la conservación del patrimonio (o recualificación), la mejora de las condiciones de vida de los residentes actuales, formas suaves de revitalización, etapas iniciales de gentrificación turística, así como la suburbanización y la expansión urbana de la ciudad. Estas dinámicas están influenciadas por una variedad de factores a niveles políticos, económicos, culturales y legislativos, operando en escalas local, nacional y global. Sugerimos que el enfoque de ensamblaje puede aplicarse de manera eficaz para estudiar transformaciones urbanas especialmente en ciudades no occidentales. .

Palavras clave: Teoría del ensamblaje; revitalización urbana; patrimonio urbano; Kashan.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid and increasing global urbanization of the last half century has been accompanied by significant growth in the number of academics and publications in urban studies. However, the urban world that the academy has explored since the beginnings of what we might call the interdisciplinary field of urban studies is far from representative of all dimensions of today's urban world(s), since many cities in Africa, Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America remain *unexplored* (Acuto *et al.* 2018; Acuto & Parnell, 2016). This is the case in Iran, where urban studies have only gained significant development in recent years (e.g., Jamshidzadeh & Mafakherian, 2019; Pourjafar *et al*., 2023; Taj Bakhsh & Pakzad, 2019), and where the complexity of urban phenomena highlights the need to redefine the term urbanization (Pilehvar, 2021). In this sense, Kashan city center is a good example. Kashan is a medium-sized city in the northern part of Isfahan province, where a significant number of old, abandoned, and run-down buildings have recently been restored and reused as tourism-oriented facilities and cultural places, by both local and transnational investors (despite Western economic sanctions on Iran). While there are other cities in Iran with a large number of historical houses, the urban transformations they are currently undergoing are not so much part of an initial process of gentrification and/or touristification but rather of a process of massive demolition of the buildings that currently occupy their historical centers, such as in Shiraz, Semnan, and Mashhad (Mohseni *et al*., 2020).

The purpose of this article is to delve into the revitalization process of the historical center of Kashan and to examine how the conversion of traditional Iranian architectural buildings in poor condition into new tourism-oriented facilities and cultural places has become the main driver of urban revitalization. Being informed by exploratory fieldwork conducted by the first author, we formulated a twofold main research question, namely: 1) How can we frame the urban transformation processes of the historical center of Kashan?; and 2) What actors and factors have played a central role in – or at least contributed to – the urban revitalization of the historic neighborhoods of Kashan city center after decades of degradation? Readers may have already noticed that this article has favored the use of the term 'revitalization' rather than 'gentrification'. This is neither a lexical confusion, nor is its use superfluous. In this research we argue that explaining urban changes simply through the lens of gentrification, without considering political, material, socio-economic and other local aspects run the risk of drifting far from reality. Therefore, in this study, instead of insisting to describe our case through the theories of gentrification, we get a contextual understanding of what local information and realities tell us about the forms and the nature of urban transformations in our study area. Put in other words, this article applies assemblage theory to grasp urban realities and to construct a relational, multiplex, and multiscale explanation of urban change through the voices of some of its protagonists.

The next part of the article presents a literature review of the study of urban revitalization by adopting assemblage theory. Then, a brief geohistorical contextualization of the urban evolution of Kashan throughout the last two decades is presented in the third section. The fourth section presents our methodological choice in relation to research aims and questions. Fifth section analyzes the results of original ethnographic research that gives voice to the protagonists of the recent process of urban change,

a process that is continuing in the historical neighborhoods of Kashan city center. The final part of the article discusses the findings, arguing that assemblage thinking is a beneficial methodological-analytical tool for understanding urban changes where conventional Western concepts such as gentrification "cannot be easily translated into local expressions" (Lees & Phillips, 2019, p. 13).

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Assemblage Theory: a challenging approach to the study of urban revitalization

> What is the complex geographical contingency to gentrification? Is the concept of gentrification suitable to discuss the processes of urban restructuring experienced in inner city or peripheral areas of the cities outside the global north? And what does the gentrification as a concept do analytically that other concepts cannot do better? (Shin *et al.*, 2019, p. 3)

Hyun Bang Shin raised these questions during his speech at Osaka University, as part of his discussion on the book *Planetary Gentrification*, which he co-authored with Loretta Lees and Ernesto López-Morales.

After being coined by Glass in the 1960s, the term *gentrification* has been extensively utilized by researchers and has remained a prevalent and continuous subject of debate in discussions about cities for the past few decades. Today, exists various approaches to the application of the concept of gentrification and locating this term in non-Western contexts encounters a lot of challenges. While Schafran's (2014, p. 321) argued that "gentrification has never been more relevant as a global urban force [...] Mumbai is gentrifying, Rio is gentrifying, Luanda is gentrifying", some other authors have been hesitant to label urban transformations characterized by economic growth and population displacement – in non-Western cities as "gentrification". In this extremist perspective, scholars see gentrification as a process associated only with specific time-geography, which is London's inner-city in the 1960s (Billingham, 2015). Notable among these authors, is Maloutas (2011) who perceive gentrification as highly dependent on contextual causality and attached to its Anglo-American origins.

In response to Schafran's argument about the global spread of gentrification, Ghertner (2015) questions the relevance of applying this concept to non-Western cities:

> I want to ask whether gentrification is really such a useful concept for describing displacement in Mumbai, Rio and Luanda. Is it time to lay the concept to bed, to file it away among those 20th century concepts we once used to anticipate globalized urbanization? (Ghertner, 2015, p. 552)

He criticizes gentrification scholarship that often uses non-Western conditions to test and confirm Western theories.

Some other scholars, while cautious about applying the concept of gentrification in all contexts, reject its fossilization and limitation to a specific time and geography. They argue that there is no single model of gentrification being transferred from the global North to the global South; rather, there are various forms of gentrification, with local trajectories giving rise to multiple forms of gentrification in endogenous ways (Lees *et al*., 2016; Lees & Phillips, 2019; Shin *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, these scholars highlight that multiple processes may occur simultaneously, with gentrification being just one of them. These processes can take place both within and beyond the borders of neighborhoods, on a larger geographical scale (Lees *et al., 2016*; Lees & Phillips, 2019; Shin, 2019; Shin & Kim, 2015). These authors stress the importance of considering all these processes rather than solely concentrating on one, to comprehensively capture urban transformations.

Nevertheless, numerous researchers from both Western and non-Western nations have adopted the term "revitalization" as a broad concept to describe the processes of physical improvement and upgrading of central neighborhoods (Ehlenz, 2016; Grodach & Ehrenfeucht, 2016; Horbliuk & Dehtiarova, 2021; Ortiz-Moya, 2018; Perkins *et al.,* 2009; Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2013; Taherkhani *et al*., 2021). While

certain authors view revitalization as synonymous with gentrification or merely a euphemism for it (Kębłowski *et al.*, 2013; Pell, 2014; Vigdor, 2010), some other have demonstrated that in some cases, the revitalization of central urban areas cannot be considered "gentrification" but rather "incumbent upgrading" or "soft forms of revitalization" (Clay, 1979, 1980, 1983; Criekingen & Decroly, 2003; Grossmann & Haase, 2015; Harris, 2020; Holcomb & Beauregard, 1981; Horbliuk & Dehtiarova, 2021; Kovács *et al.,* 2015; Laska & Spain, 1980; Perkins *et al.,* 2009; Teernstra, 2013; Temelová, 2007). Incumbent upgrading is a process in which physical improvement of houses and neighborhoods takes place by existing residents, without causing population displacement or significant changes in the residents' socio-economic status (Clay, 1979, 1983; Holcomb & Beauregard, 1981; Varady, 2018). According to Perkins *et al.* (2009, p. 50), "widespread incumbent upgrading is a sign of successful, stable neighborhood revitalization" while, Kovács *et al.* (2015, p. 267) examined "soft forms of revitalization", stating that the arrival of upper middle-class population and the displacement of long-term residents is insignificant. Therefore, this process cannot be considered as gentrification.

We argue that to grasp this complexity of urban revitalization processes and its diverse possibilities, assemblage thinking could be a helpful method. The use of assemblage theory in studying urban transformation processes has gained relevance in academic scholarship, especially over the last decade. The composition of an assemblage consists of human and nonhuman entanglements (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011) as heterogeneous entities (such as buildings or people) enmeshed in a dense network of norms, rules, and regulations. The multiple (and often complex) interactions between these heterogeneous entities and urban space generates a field of research and action with enormous potential for sophisticated urban research. While the epistemological knowledge generated as a result of the influence of positivism and Marxism on urban geography has serious theoretical and conceptual limitations, assemblage theory allows for a more detailed analysis of phenomena that characterize the development of urban contexts not affected by the urban capitalism of Western countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The epistemological development of assemblage theory includes a first stage (which we could call *the embryonic stage*) and a more recent second stage that has gained strong academic acceptance. After first being defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), the concept of "assemblage" remained in a state of hibernation in urban studies debates until the mid-2000s. It was in 2006 that the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* published a special issue problematizing global knowledge, in which Marcus and Saka (2006) and Venn (2006) applied the concept of assemblage to urban studies. Marcus and Saka (2006, p. 101) defined assemblage theory as an "anti-structural concept that permits the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in nonetheless ordered social life". In this sense, Venn (2006, p. 107) pointed to the importance of turning the focus toward "the process and dynamic character of the inter-relationships between the heterogeneous elements of the phenomenon". In parallel, the philosopher Manuel DeLanda published his influential book *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* in 2006. In the words of the North American architect and urban planner Ozan Karaman, DeLanda's book shed light on how "the 'parts' which constitute a 'whole' (in this case society) form a seamless totality, analogically equivalent to a body with a functional unity of its constituent organs" (Karaman 2008, p. 935).

At the beginning of the 2010s, four key publications brought the debate on assemblage as a new theoretical-conceptual approach squarely into the arena of urban studies. This led to the development of a body of theories, concepts, and perspectives in the field of Actor-Network Theory. For instance, Farías and Bender (2010) edited a seminal book on urban assembling, *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Research*. The works presented in this anthology are framed within the reinvigoration of a new method of analysis encompassing the human and nonhuman aspects of cities. In this sense, McFarlane argues that:

> Assemblage thinking is interested in emergence and process, and in multiple temporalities and possibilities …. There are two central ways in which assemblage is becoming popularized: first, as a descriptor of sociomaterial transformation, and second, in relation to urban policy mobilities. (McFarlane, 2011a, p. 206)

McFarlane (2011b, p. 649) points out that assemblage theory in urban studies arises as "a useful basis for thinking of the city as a dwelling process and, second, that it is particularly useful for conceiving the spatiality of the city as processual, relational, mobile, and unequal." He also adds:

> The concept of assemblage is particularly useful for grasping the spatially processual, relational, and generative nature of the city, where "generative" refers to both the momentum of historical processes and political economies and to the eventful, disruptive, atmospheric, and random juxtapositions that characterize urban space. (MacFarlane, 2011b, p. 650-651)

According to McFarlane's (2011a) reasoning, urban change is no longer just a result of public sector policies, the practices of private investors, or the product of the real estate market. Rather, it is affected by all these factors, while power and authority are continually negotiated between local, regional, and global institutional apparatuses (see also Farías & Bender, 2010).

This new conceptual approach to "urban change" led Brenner et al. (2011, p. 236) to argue that "questions posed by assemblage urbanists – for instance, regarding human/nonhuman interfaces, networked interdependencies and the production of sociomaterial infrastructures – are essential and they certainly deserve serious, sustained exploration in future forays into the urban question."

In this sense, the introduction of assemblage theory into the field of urban studies, specifically into urban revitalization, allows us to see the city as an assemblage of people, places, networks, things, events, resources, capital, social relations, and cultures, all working together to produce and reproduce the city (DeLanda, 2006; Linz, 2017; McFarlane, 2011c). More specifically, the use of assemblage theory enables an understanding of how multiple elements—cultural, social, political, economic, ecological, and material—align to shape and reshape particular forms of urbanism (McFarlane, 2011c).

Therefore, assemblage thinking in urban studies helps scholars "to overcome reductionist, linear, and causal thinking in favor of a better understanding of constant change, unexpected effects, shifts, and local context" (Grossmann & Haase, 2015, p. 728)In recent years, assemblage thinking has gained recognition as a valuable methodological and analytical tool among urban scholars (e.g., Baker & McGuirk, 2017; Brenner *et al.*, 2011; Grossmann & Haase, 2015; Linz, 2017; McCann & Ward, 2012; Sweeney *et al.*, 2018; Yadollahi, 2017; Yetiskul & Demirel, 2018). This approach offers the potential to reveal and interpret the urban milieu spatially, socially, and materially (Baker & McGuirk, 2017). Interestingly, some authors suggest that assemblage theory belongs to the emerging field of critical urban studies (e.g., Sheppard *et al*., 2020; Welsh, 2018). This approach shifts away from viewing the city as a static product, instead conceptualizing it as an ongoing process. It emphasizes the role of human agency in assembling urban transformation (Durose *et al*., 2021).

McFarlane (2011c) and Durose *et al*. (2021) further emphasizes the importance of analyzing the "who," "how," and "what" that shapes the assembly of cities. Urban assemblage theory, according to McGuirk *et al*. (2016), can be understood as a "performed and emergent consequence of 'relatedness'," subject to a variety of relational effects and determinations. As a result, assemblage thinking is increasingly acknowledged as an effective tool for comprehending the complexity, multiplicity, processuality, and uncertainty of urban phenomena (Baker & McGuirk, 2017; McFarlane, 2011a, 2011b).

This analytical approach, which views urban revitalization as an ongoing process rather than a finished product (Durose *et al*., 2021), provides a valuable framework for a deeper and more detailed analysis of the revitalization of historic neighborhoods, such as those in downtown Kashan. Before applying this framework, however, it is important to first offer a brief geohistorical overview of Kashan's historic center.

III. A BRIEF GEOHISTORICAL NOTE ABOUT KASHAN FOR NON-LOCAL READERS

Kashan is located approximately 200km from Tehran, the capital of Iran (see fig. 1). It was originally founded around 9000 years ago at the surrounding Sialk Hills (a large ancient archaeological site). Kashan, which was once the center of Iran's textile art (Amanat & Mottahedeh, 2018), is currently one of Iran's major destinations for domestic and foreign tourists, thanks to its abundance of historical attractions. It is currently part of the UNESCO Learning Cities network.

Fig. 1 – Location of Kashan in Iran. Colour figure available online.
Fig. 1 – Localização de Kashan no Irão. Figura a cores disponível online.

As shown in table 1, the number of domestic tourists is significantly higher than that of foreign tourists. Between 2019 and 2020, there was a substantial decrease in the number of tourists due to the Covid-19 epidemic (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2023). Starting in 2021, tourists began to return gradually, and by 2022, the number of tourists had increased with the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. In May 2022, Kashan experienced an unprecedented number of domestic tourists. This was due to a national holiday in Iran coinciding with the easing of Corona restrictions, reduced fear of the virus, and the beginning of the rose picking season in Kashan. The influx of visitors was so high that Kashan was unable to accommodate all of them, leading some to return to their cities.

However, there was a noticeable disparity in the number of domestic and international tourists. In 2022, the number of foreign tourists did not increase at the same rate as domestic tourists and was even lower than before the pandemic. This phenomenon was largely linked to the prevailing international political tensions and the hesitancy or reluctance of foreigners to travel to Iran, a trend which was further exacerbated by social movements within Iran (named Woman, Life, Freedom revolution) in September 2022.

Table 1 – Number of tourist arrivals in Kashan (2018-2022).
Quadro 1 – Número de chegadas de turistas em Kashan (2018-2022).

Tourist arrivals	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Domestic tourists	72 153	80 965	23 430	63 576	134 639
Foreign tourists	29 025	28 425	545	2 496	12 504
Total	101 178	109 390	23 975	66 072	147 143

Source: Kashan Cultural Heritage Organization, 2023

Today's built environment in the historic district of the city, which occupies an area of 482 hectares, is the result of urban development between the late 1840s and early 1910s (see fig. 2 and 3). After an earthquake destroyed a large part of the city in the mid-1840s, houses, streets, aqueducts, mosques, and government buildings were rebuilt, with Kashan maintaining its historic urban morphology. The urban history of Kashan from the 1910s until the present day can be separated into three distinct periods, which we call (1) *slow urbanization*, 1910-1950; (2) *rapid urbanization*, 1960-2000s; and (3) t*he revitalization boom* (2010s-present).

Fig. 2 – Location of the study area in Kashan, Iran (left); Urban morphology of the old historic district (right). Colour figure available online.

Fig. 2 – Localização da área de estudo em Kashan, Irão (à esquerda); Morfologia urbana do antigo distrito histórico (à direita). Figura a cores disponível online.
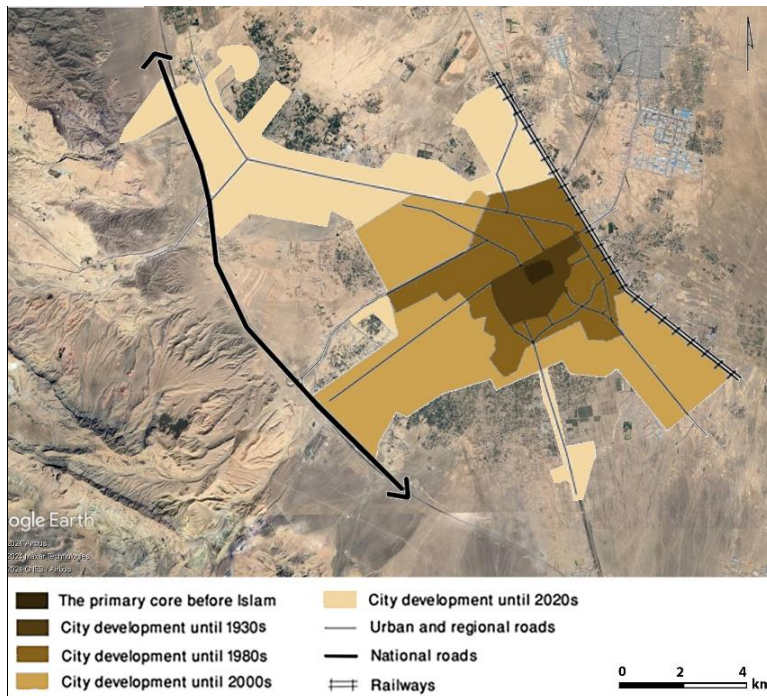

Fig. 3 – Scheme of urban growth in Kashan from before Islam to present day. Colour figure available online.

Fig. 3 – Esquema de crescimento urbano em Kashan desde antes do Islão até aos dias de hoje. Figura a cores disponível online.

From the late 1840s until 1930, the physical boundaries of the city remained unchanged. However, it is significant that in the 1920s, the first modern institutions, including government offices, banks, and a spinning factory, were established outside the old city. Also, in the late 1930s, the construction of a rectangular square and cross streets that branch off from it disrupted the historic urban fabric and the structure of the city center's historic neighborhoods. However, it was after the 1940s that simultaneous rapid urban population growth and urbanization forced the emergence of new-era planning and development during the second half of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), accelerating the modernization of the country (Rasoolimanesh *et al.,* 2013). In 1946, Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam proposed the creation and implementation of a Seven Year Development Plan valued at an estimated US $1,900 million to build infrastructure, establish key industries, and expand public services and education (Rezazadeh Shafaq

&Lotz, 1950). This first development plan (as well as the subsequent ones) had profound effects on urban planning policies (Clark, 2014) and a significant impact on the urban fabric of Iranian cities. In spatial terms, Iran's development plans implemented over the past few decades have allowed the modernization of Iranian cities, the expansion of urbanized areas, and the escalation of urban sprawl and suburbanization, mainly shaped by the layout of the main roads and railways (see fig. 3).

However, this modernization of "the urban phenomenon" in Iran has also had negative impacts. It has led to the destruction of numerous heritage buildings and the gradual deterioration of historical urban fabric. This is the case in Kashan, where a rapid process of deterioration of the built environment, population decline, and growth of urban poverty among families residing in the historic neighborhoods of the city center began in the 1960s. This situation was accentuated by the first master plan of the city (1974), which disrupted the interaction between its central and outer areas, exacerbating the marginalization of the historic neighborhoods of the city center. This process was characterized by three main factors.

Firstly, ruins and abandoned buildings were scattered by drug addicts and criminals or transformed into garbage dumps. Secondly, many businesses and commercial activities were established along the newly built streets. And thirdly, several traditional commercial and production units in old neighborhoods were closed. As a result of all this, real estate values in these neighborhoods dropped abruptly. Since the 1980s, the progressive deterioration of the city center's buildings and fabric was accompanied by the emergence of new neighborhoods on the outskirts, leading to an increased exodus of the population from the historical neighborhoods.

Since the 1990s, conservation laws and regulations have imposed restrictions on both the alteration of existing buildings and the construction of new buildings, such as limiting the maximum height to two stories, to preserve the area's historical landscape and its traditional architecture. These restrictions led to a significant number of residents relocating from these neighborhoods to newer areas and newly constructed homes (Varesi *et al.*, 2014), resulting in capital outflow from the historic area. Consequently, numerous houses were left vacant, abandoned -some even collapsed later-, and some others were leased to low-income groups, particularly Afghan immigrants. Consequently, while the population of the historical area of the city was 45 133 in 2010 (Varesi *et al.,* 2014), this number has decreased to 44 552 in 2017 (Shaterian *et al.,* 2017). Meanwhile, the master plan of 2011 predicted that by 2015, this area will accommodate 67 375 people (7.7% of the city's total population).

From the early 2000s onward, the government decided to support the restoration and reuse of traditional Iranian houses across the country. This decision propelled the progressive arrival of local, national, and even transnational private investors (many of them with Iranian roots or nationality). In their recent studies, Rezaei *et al.* (2019, 2020) found that the main motive mobilizing these private investors was the recovery and preservation of these traditional old houses as national cultural heritage, while a few of them sought to transform them into fancy boutique hotels. In any case, the arrival of private investors in the area has been accompanied by increasing property values.

IV.   METHODOLOGY

The epistemological commitments of assemblage thinking – multiplicity, processuality, labor, and uncertainty – as articulated by Baker & McGuirk (2017, p. 19), necessitate the utilization of a research methodology that facilitates a comprehensive qualitative comprehension of the phenomena. Furthermore, and for the purposes of this article – comprehending the transformation processes of Kashan's historical center and exploring the significant factors influencing these changes – an extensive study of the physical, demographic, economic, managerial, and legal environments over an extended timeframe was necessary. However, given the scarcity of documentation, poor quality or outdated statistical data pertaining to real estate, population, household income, and other key metrics, the methodological options of quantitative analysis and mixed methods were completely infeasible. As an example, the latest population census dates back to 2016 (Statistical Centre of Iran [SCI], 2024). According to both the SCI and Iran Data Portal (IDP, 2024) (an initiative funded by the US' Social Science Research Council), the latest available data on construction permits in urban areas and conventional housing units date back to 2012, while the latest

population data broken down by employment status and sex date back to 2006. Consequently, we opted for an ethnographic approach, with a focus on interviews, completed with photography and in situ mapping, to enrich our engagement with our research subjects.

Thus, the overall objective of this methodological approach was to monitor urban changes in the study area, identify and depict the different actors, and offer an alternative strategy to generate qualitative information for a scientifically rigorous discussion of the nature of recent urban transformations in the historic neighborhoods of Kashan.

The fieldwork for the current research was conducted in two main phases April-May 2020 and May 2022 and a complementary phase including additional interviews in July 2023. During these two main phases, in addition to photography and mapping, 65 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with different groups of actors. The interviewees included 15 private investors (interviewees 1 to 15), 25 residents (interviewees 16 to 40), and 13 visitors (interviewees 41 to 53), two municipal staff members (interviewees 54 and 55), five real estate agencies (interviewees 56 to 60), an independent real estate developer (interviewee 61), an expert of the Kashan Cultural Heritage Organization (interviewee 62), a university professor with considerable knowledge of the case study area (interviewee 63), the founder of the Kashan Cultural Research Center (interviewee 64) and a Kashan-based architect specializing in traditional Iranian architecture (interviewee 65, two interviews). The interviews with the last two people mentioned yielded three significant advantages. Firstly, their active participation in the restoration process of historical buildings in Kashan since the early 2000s has granted them a profound understanding of governmental approaches and programs. Secondly, their connections with domestic and international private investors have provided them with comprehensive insights into the latter parties' objectives. Lastly, their independence and lack of current government affiliation allow them to discuss relevant facts without political bias.

Interview questions varied for each group. For example, in the case of investors, we inquired about their motivations for investing in old houses, the restoration process, legal procedures, and their future plans. We asked the residents about their experiences with neighborhood changes and its impact on their lives. We asked public sector officials about the policies at both the local and national levels concerning private sector investments in heritage conservation, existing legal frameworks, and public sector's approaches to the historical center. In interviews with residents, we asked them about the transformations in their neighborhood, as well as the impact of recent investments in historic houses on their quality of life and their connection to the neighborhood. All interviewees were recruited using the Snowball technique. In turn, the analysis of data obtained from secondary sources (including articles, official documents, and reports) was essential to complement the information obtained in the field, while visual material (photographs) was taken to help readers better understand the main argument of this article.

V.   RESULTS

1. A heterogeneous group of investors in a complex interplay of common and private interests

The historic neighborhoods of Kashan city center were not subject to reinvestment until 1994 when the then president of Iran visited Kashan. The visit of President Hashemi Rafsanjani was a turning point for change in the historic center of Kashan. Interviewee 65, a traditional architect in Kashan, recalls how the president "ordered that Tabatabaei's House (see fig. 4) be restored within six months and, if the result was satisfactory, other historic houses in Kashan also be restored" (pers. comm., April 21, 2020). In turn, interviewee 64, the director of the Kashan Cultural Studies Foundation, originally from Kashan, who was the Minister of Mines and Metals during the Hashemi presidency (1989-1997) and influential in Kashan's transformations at their outset explained that the restoration of old, degraded buildings "led to the revival of the forgotten traditional arts related to architecture". According to him, "Iranian and foreign artists played an undeniable role both in the revival of historic houses and in encouraging others to invest in the field of art" (Interviewee 65, 21 April, 2020).

According to the statements collected during the interviews with these two informants (interviewees 64 and 65), there was much opposition from local authorities and citizens at the beginning of the process because the restoration of old traditional buildings was considered a waste of financial resources. Moreover, many citizens demanded the demolition of the old houses and their replacement with new ones. However, after four years, when tourists started coming to Kashan to visit the restored traditional houses, these objections were withdrawn, and a new era began in Kashan. Since then, urban authorities and citizens have largely supported the restoration of historic houses with public funds.

Fig. 4 – Tabatabaei's House, the first historic building, restored by the public sector. Colour figure available online.

Fig. 4 – Casa de Tabatabaei, primeiro edifício histórico restaurado pelo setor público. Figura a cores disponível online.

Source: Rezaei (2023)

According to two long-standing residents (interviewees 31 and 39) and the owner of a real estate agency in the area (interviewee 56), in the early 2000s, the number of private investors purchasing and restoring traditional houses in the historic neighborhoods of Kashan city center began to increase. Investors benefited from the low prices of old houses because the owners, dissatisfied with the dilapidation of their houses and neighborhood, were eager to sell their properties and move to new areas. Furthermore, many houses were abandoned and left unused by their owners long ago, waiting for a potential buyer. It was in the late 2000s that the magnitude of new investors operating in the area led to a boom in the acquisition of traditional houses for restoration, and a consequent sharp increase in property prices. Similar to many other global urban contexts, real estate speculators played a significant role in this increase. As interviewee 65 stated, "Recently, an investor bought a house for 48 billion Tomans [equivalent to one million USD in July 2023], which is not worth more than 10 billion Tomans [equivalent to 200 000 USD in July 2023]. The cost of its restoration is estimated at 100 billion Tomans [equivalent to more than two million USD in July 2023]" (Interviewee, 20 July, 2023). The main protagonists of this process, private investors, can be divided into four main groups.

The first group comprises upper-class investors from Tehran, the capital city of Iran. During their trips to Kashan and visiting government-restored historic houses, these people became fascinated by charm of these houses and decided to buy and restore a historic house (see fig. 5). The motivation of this group, who are highly educated and interested in heritage and culture, is mostly a desire to save the heritage and provide a secondary home for their short stays in Kashan. However, later on, some of them have converted these buildings into tourist accommodations, with the goal of keeping them active, rather than earning income. For example, interviewee 10, an architect in her sixties living in Tehran, renovated a house not for profit, but "to save the house". However, in order to maintain it and prevent it from being unused, at times she accepts a limited number of guests – up to 12 people, who are mostly foreign tourists. She narrated her experience as follows:

> When I traveled to Kashan in 2001, I became very interested in its historic houses. Upon the suggestion of a friend, I purchased this house. The building was worn-out and ruined, but its architecture was very interesting and authentic. It took seven years to restore it, and I spent a lot of money. (pers. comm., April 23, 2020)

Fig. 5 – Two traditional houses restored by private investors from the first and second groups. Colour figure available online.

Fig. 5 – Duas casas tradicionais recuperadas por investidores privados do primeiro e segundo grupos. Figura a cores disponível online.

Source: Rezaei (2023)

The second group consists of Iranian expatriates who, while traveling to Iran and visiting the restored historical houses in Kashan, decided to buy and restore a house for their own short-term stays. They are motivated by a sense of nostalgia, as well as the low initial investment cost resulting from the favorable exchange rate for holders of foreign currency. Many of these investors are Iranian artists who emigrated to Western countries and have since transformed the houses into art galleries or workshops. Others have turned the buildings into boutique hotels, although their motivations are unlikely to have been purely economic, given the minimal revenue generated by boutique hotels and other tourist activities in Kashan compared to foreign currency.

The third group is composed of foreigners interested in the historic houses of Kashan. These investors, who number less than ten people, have become a successful example for the incorporation of transnational players in the field of real estate investment in the historic neighborhoods. These investors belonging to these third group are upper-class individuals and/or artists from France, Germany, the USA, and Belgium. They have high purchasing power, and were fascinated by the culture, art, and architecture of Kashan during their trips to the city and subsequently decided to buy one or more houses, converting them in some cases to artistic and cultural places. These foreign investors became acquainted with the historic houses of Kashan through their Iranian friends. As interviewee 65 stated, "Every Iranian living abroad who buys a house in Kashan brings his foreign friends to Kashan, and in this way, foreigners become interested in buying historical houses" (Interviewee 65, 5 May, 2022). According to the owners of two real estate agencies (interviewees 56 and 58), since foreigners cannot legally buy property in Iran, the transactions are signed by an Iranian friend or trusted representative. As interviewee 56 stated,

> transactions are performed in notary offices, and, in the official documents, the house owner is [listed as] an Iranian; In the property deed or affidavit, the name of the Iranian person is mentioned, not the foreign person. However, both the Iranian individual and the foreign investor sign an agreement stating that the property belongs to the foreign investor. Or, in some cases, the Iranian individual sends a receipt via email or Telegram or WhatsApp, etc. to his foreign friend showing that the foreign individual has paid the money. It should be noted that this receipt acts as an agreement between the two parties and does not possess any legal standing. Nevertheless, in the case of a potential dispute between the two parties, it may serve as supporting evidence that can be submitted to legal authorities. (Intervewee 56 , 3 May, 2022)

The interviews conducted confirm that the motivations of this third group of investors (foreigners) are largely the same as the previous two groups; they are not primarily driven by business objectives. Interestingly, Kashan is the only Iranian city where foreigners have invested in the revival of historic buildings. Yazd and Kashan are the two Iranian cities with the most valuable historic houses. However,

since Kashan is close to Tehran, can be reached via the Tehran-Isfahan highway, and has a more temperate climate than Yazd, foreign investors (as well as Iranians living abroad) have chosen to invest in this city. The presence of foreigners in Kashan has encouraged more people to buy houses in the historic district of this city. In addition, since foreigners have the capacity to pay higher prices for the houses (because of the low value of the Iranian currency compared to the USD and the Euro), owners and speculators took advantage of this opportunity to sell the properties at prices higher than their real values. This caused real estate speculation and a significant increase in the price of historic houses in Kashan. As interviewee 62, the deputy of the Kashan Cultural Heritage Organization explained:

> In recent years, many foreigners have invested in the historic district of Kashan. For example, a German university professor bought a house for his short stay. The former ambassador of France bought a house, and its renovation has just started. A famous Belgian sculptor has purchased eight houses and wants to turn them into an art museum. A famous American-Iranian chef bought and restored a house and plans to turn it into a culinary school. (Interviewee 62, 3 May, 2022)

The fourth group is composed of local investors from Kashan who are largely influenced by the initiatives of non-local investors. Among this group, some restored their own ancestral houses and repurposed them for tourism or cultural uses, to revive a traditional profession (such as textile production), and in some cases, to use these houses as a permanent or temporary residence. These investors are frequently influenced by their emotional motivations and a strong desire to revive childhood memories. Some others, who purchased old houses from their original owners, have a variety of motivations. An increase in the number of tourists motivated some of these investors to buy a house with the aim of turning it into a tourist accommodation business. However, according to the comments of informants from the second group during the interviews, the income generated by boutique hotels is not significant compared to the restoration and maintenance costs. Nevertheless, it appears that economic incentives hold greater significance within this fourth group compared to the previous groups. In particular, investing in real estate with continually appreciating value seems highly lucrative. Importantly, although local investors from Kashan were few in the initial stages, today, they constitute about half of the investors in the historic district.

Finally, the interviews allowed us to confirm that all four groups of investors restore old houses for cultural, financial or personal/emotional reasons, have played an undeniable role in the production of tourist and cultural places in Kashan (see fig. 6). Furthermore, they actively contributed to raising the local population's awareness of the value of their heritage.
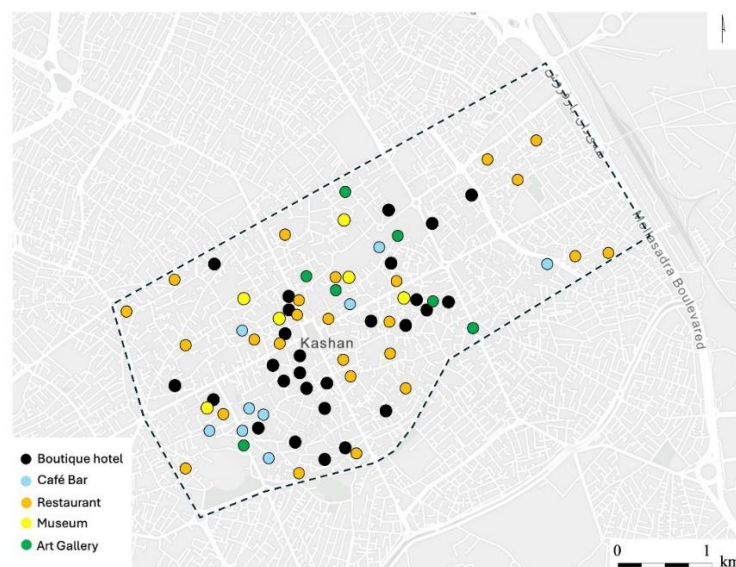

Fig. 6 – Spatial distribution of restored houses in the study area and their new uses (2022). Colour figure available online.
Fig. 6 – Distribuição espacial das casas restauradas na área de estudo e seus novos (2022). Figura a cores disponível online.

It is important to note that in Kashan, real estate agencies play a minor role in the buying and selling of historic houses. Rather, it is "intermediaries" who establish relationships between sellers and buyers. Intermediaries (or even real estate speculators) facilitate the transactions based upon their comprehensive knowledge of the available historic houses and their owners. These people are well-known in Kashan, and anyone who wants to buy a historic house will refer to them. Independent real estate developers who specialize in constructing modern buildings also have a significant role in the process of selling, buying and restoration of historical houses. According to an independent real estate developer (interviewee 61):

> In Kashan, historical houses hold more value and profit potential compared to modern and luxurious apartments. For example, I construct a most stylish villa in the modern neighborhoods of the city ranging from 200 to 300 square meters in size and sell it for a maximum of 8-9 billion Tomans [equivalent to 160 000-180 000 USD in July 2023]. On the other hand, I also engage in the purchase and renovation of historic houses. For example, purchasing and renovating an old house with an area of 150 square meters, costs only half as much as constructing that modern villa. Surprisingly, I can sell it at double the price of the aforementioned villa. (Interviewee 61, 20 July, 2023)

The historic houses vary considerably in terms of their physical condition; for this reason, the degree of intervention is also very different. In some cases, more than 70% of the property has been destroyed; the restoration of such houses is very difficult and time-consuming and requires a huge budget. The difficulty of restoring original architectural features and both outdoor and indoor decorations, the need for structural reinforcement, and soil drainage before restoration are factors that significantly increase restoration costs. Interviewee 65 pointed out:

> Our objective is always to preserve the originality of historic houses as much as possible and restore them to their original state. However, there are sometimes obstacles. Where houses are converted into boutique hotels, there is a need for some changes to adapt the houses to the new use, such as the construction of bathrooms and toilets inside the rooms. Sometimes, the owners like to add a lot of decorative details to the building, which damages the originality of the building. In such situation, if we do not accept these changes, the owners may give up and abandon the renovation, which will lead to the destruction and loss of the building. As a result, we are forced to accept these changes. (interviewee 65, 5 May, 2022)

2. The impacts of urban revitalization on the local community

The ethnographic fieldwork conducted for the purposes of this research found that most of the long-standing residents of the historic neighborhoods of Kashan were largely satisfied with the spatial, social, cultural, and even economic changes that have occurred in the area over recent years. "Environmental improvement", "revival of neighborhoods", "security improvement", "residents' sense of pride", and "raising awareness of heritage" were the most important keywords used to describe the process of urban revitalization in historical neighborhoods by the community members who participated in this study.

According to a long-standing resident, a man in his fifties (interviewee 27), "Those who used to consider living in these neighborhoods as shameful are now proud of living here" (Interviewee 27, 12 May, 2020). A 30-year-old female resident (interviewee 35, May 12, 2020) also stated, "The most important effect is that the neighborhoods that were places for thugs and drug addicts have become safer. Since the number of tourists has increased, dilapidated houses have been restored, and lighting has improved". Interestingly, Interviewee 8, around 50 years old, one of the pioneer local investors (belonging to the fourth group), used similar words to assess the urban revitalization of the area:

> Most of the houses that the investors bought were abandoned, and no one lived in them. Some houses had become garbage dumps or warehouses for building materials. The

purchase of these houses by private investors has not caused the eviction of their residents but breathed new life into these ruins. This is what I call revival. (Interviewee 8, May 5, 2022)

Regarding the houses that were inhabited by local residents, the arrival of investors gave the owners the opportunity to sell their dilapidated houses at a high price and move to new neighborhoods with modern houses. It is worth mentioning that some owners had previously aimed to destroy their old houses and build new ones in their place. At this point, it is crucial to highlight that in addition to the investments made by the middle and prosperous classes of citizens in building housing in new areas since three decades ago, the government also started constructing high-rise, low-cost housing aimed at the low-income class of society in the outskirts of Kashan – like others cities in Iran – since 2010. These large-scale housing projects – still ongoing – have attracted a significant portion of residents from the central neighborhoods.

Interestingly, as a result of the arrival of investors and the increase in real estate prices in recent years, some owners have decided to restore their houses and continue to live in them. This process has led to the physical and environmental improvement of the neighborhoods without disruptive demographic change, which resembles what some scholars have labeled as "incumbent upgrading" elsewhere (Clay 1979, 1983; Holcomb & Beauregard, 1981; Varady, 2018).

In addition to private sector investment, the public sector (including the municipality and the national Cultural Heritage Organization) has also formulated and implemented projects in the historic district of Kashan. These projects often include the purchase and restoration of landmark buildings, improvement of public spaces such as pavements, restoration of façades, creation of green spaces, and creation of public parking lots.

Nevertheless, the urban revitalization process in the historic quarters of Kashan city center has not been without its challenges. First, in a similar manner to other historic neighborhoods subject to revitalization efforts in the Global North, the Global South, and the Global East, the recent growth of urban tourism in Kashan has also led to the emergence of resident mobility problems – such as traffic congestion and a lack of parking spaces in the neighborhoods – especially during the tourism season (May and June). The narrow alleys and the compactness of the urban fabric have caused the residents to face severe problems when visitors' cars pass or stop in the streets. In addition, during the tourist season, some streets become one-way to accommodate crowded tourist buses, leading residents to have trouble accessing their own neighborhoods. A 40-year-old female resident (interviewee 29) stated:

It has become really difficult for us to pass these narrow streets. Today, I was stuck in my car in this alley for approximately 20 minutes. This was not the case before. Now, there are many traffic problems because of tourists' cars. There is no place for parking. I park my car a few streets away from my house. (Interviewee 29, 22 April, 2020).

Second, in recent years, the arrival of investors willing to pay large sums of money to purchase traditional houses in Kashan's city center, along with the consequent increase in real estate prices, has led many long-standing local owners to stop renting their properties to Afghan migrants and local low-income workers. However, it is important to note that many of these tenants do not move out of these neighborhoods. Instead, they find other low-rent old houses, often without significant architectural value, within the district. As a result, this process has not caused a significant change in the area's population structure and can be considered a "soft form of revitalization" (Kovács *et al.*, 2015) rather than gentrification.

Additionally, despite the 2011 master plan aiming to increase the population in Kashan's historic neighborhood, it failed to incorporate strategies or mechanisms to retain current residents or attract new ones. Consequently, due to the absence of effective monitoring and control policies, the area has become a playground for investors and developers, who frequently repurpose historic houses for non-residential uses.

According to the deputy of the Kashan Cultural Heritage Organization (interviewee 62), by 2023, more than 350 buildings had been restored by the private sector. Interviewee 65, a traditional architect involved in the restoration of many of these houses, noted that approximately 80% of the restored houses

have been adapted for tourists or visitors, while the remaining 20% have been repurposed for other uses, such as art galleries, workshops, cultural centers, and, rarely, residential purposes (Interviewee 65, 5 May, 2022). The proliferation of new leisure and hospitality spaces catering to tourists is illustrated in figure 6.

These reuse projects would suggest the forced reconfiguration of the multiple quotidianities established over generations; or, in other words, the existence of a process of deterritorialization – to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) terminology – of the historical neighborhoods of Kashan during the current process of urban revitalization. But simultaneously, the ethnographic data gathered in this research, including observational fieldwork as well as interviews, verified the existence of a process of re-territorialization by social groups other than the long-standing occupants. This process of re-territorialization is centered around the newly-opened boutique hotels, cafes, and restaurants established in renovated houses. These new leisure spaces are mostly oriented towards new foreign and domestic tourists, as well as to Kashan's upper-middle classes. Interviewee 41, a 30-year-old local woman living in a non-historic neighborhood, who came with her friends to a restaurant in the historic part of the city, described her experience:

> Before the restoration of these houses, I had never come to the historic neighborhoods of the city… But now, on weekends, I come with my husband to these restaurants for lunch. These houses have a very pleasant atmosphere. They are very attractive and charming and bring back old memories. The restoration of these houses has made the youth of Kashan familiar with the historic center of their city. (Interviewee 41, 4 May, 2022)

On the contrary, these new venues are rarely used by local residents because they are mostly from low- and middle-income groups and cannot afford their products and services. One long-term resident, a 45-year-old man, (interviewee 40) told us that "Our income is low, and we cannot use the restaurants and cafes that have recently been established in the neighborhood. They have good food and attractive spaces, but we cannot use them. These places are made for tourists" (Interviewee 40, 12 May, 2020). Furthermore, several local commercial spaces (such as bakeries, butchers' shops, and dairy products shops) have been turned into tourist uses such as handicraft shops; therefore, residents must go to the main streets situated outside their historic neighborhoods to provide for their daily needs.

3. An assemblage of interests and desires

The preceding analysis of the urban revitalization of the historic neighborhoods of Kashan demonstrates the complex, non-linear interplay between different economic, social, cultural, and political issues. The first one is the implementation of urban development policies through the promotion of cultural tourism in the context of international financial and economic sanctions. The second is the implementation of government-led urban planning policies oriented *simultaneously* to the revaluation of historical neighborhoods and encouraging new developments on the outskirts of the city. The third is the proliferation of particular and local forms of real estate investment oriented towards the transformation of abandoned traditional houses into boutique hotels and leisure-related businesses for Kashan's middle classes as well as tourists.

The scholarship has established that tourists and visitors have an undeniable role in reshaping the economic and cultural fabric of the historic neighborhoods in the heart of cities. Within this general framework of urban transformation, many cities with significant historical heritage in the Global North, Global South, and Global East have seen how tourism and heritage revitalization reinforce each other in a reciprocal relationship (e.g. Bui *et al.,* 2020; Canale *et al.,* 2019). In the case of Kashan city center, the revitalization of historic buildings attracts more tourists, while the tourists' arrival encourages public and private sector investment in the area (Rezaei *et al.,* 2019, 2020). On the other hand, both the national and local administrations have supported investors in the restoration of traditional houses, in a similar way to old buildings in other cities, significantly affected by the processes of gentrification and/or tourism gentrification (or touristification). The profile of "entrepreneurs", "resistants", and "resilients" and their voices, discourses, and grammars show some similarities with the early voices, discourses, and grammars

that emerged some years ago in two of southern Europe's most touristified cities, Lisbon and Barcelona (Sequera & Nofre, 2018).

There are also important differences that need to be highlighted. For example, in addition to investors, a network composed of intermediaries, speculators, local real estate agencies (to a lesser extent), restorers, and sellers of construction materials form an agency that enables the buying, selling and restoration of historic buildings. Here it is worth mentioning that at both the local and national level, the lack of transaction monitoring in Iran allows speculators, including independent individuals and real estate agents, to exploit informal market opportunities. Therefore, the material urban fabric, specifically a set of historic buildings, are the primary medium through which these actors enhance their power within the historic center. On the other hand, although the private-led urban revitalization of the study area has caused some inconvenience to the residents, they do not protest their neighborhood's changes. In general terms, they show a high degree of satisfaction with the process of urban revitalization, since it has not only restored and protected the local architectural heritage but also resulted in the displacement of the "unwanted" (especially drug addicts occupying some abandoned houses) out of the neighborhood. In contrast to many European cities where protests against touristification have spread across the continent (Colomb & Novy, 2017), the lack of strong resistance by the long-standing residents in Kashan has paved the way for the rapid transformation of the spatial, economic, and cultural fabric of the area.

On the other hand, it is worth noting the importance of cultural factors in the production and reproduction of power relations between the different protagonists of the urban revitalization of the historic neighborhoods of Kashan and their relationship with the forces of the real estate market (which is speculative, even in a context of economic and financial sanctions). Since the first half of the 20th century, the process of urbanization in Iranian cities has been associated with the modernization of society. The process of modernization and desire for change, which started in Iran at the end of the Qajar period (the mid-1920s) and is still alive, has led the residents to prefer new neighborhoods and new houses, rejecting everything that shows signs of obsolescence (Hanachee & Rezaei, 2015), such as living in an old traditional house. In fact, some authors have recently noted that this process has similarities with the process of contemporary urbanization in the Global North (Pilehvar, 2021; Sharifzadegan & Farzaneh, 2021).

In this sense, it would not be misplaced to suggest that this trend of adaptive reuse can be seen, in some ways, as a continuation of the modernization (Westernization) of Iranian society, a trend that resembles in part case studies from other Muslim countries such as Morocco (Joly, 2021; Rezaei *et al*., 2024) and secular countries with a majority Muslim population such as Turkey (Koşun & Turan, 2020).

The desire for modernization (Westernization) does not only involve the acquisition of an old traditional house to restore it but also, for those with less purchasing power, making use of its facilities, sometimes Instagraming the experience. Interestingly and finally, the increase in both domestic and international tourists hosted in boutique hotels located in the historic neighborhoods of Kashan also aligns with the diffusion of Kashan-geotagged photos through social media channels. As Falk and Hagsten (2020) note, the number of *Instagram* posts is significantly higher for UNESCO World Heritage Sites compared to other tourist attractions and contributes to further increasing the number of tourists who want to visit the place, as the observational fieldwork conducted for the purposes of this article has allowed us to confirm.

VI.   CONCLUSION

The principal research question focused on identifying the key actors and factors contributing to the transformations of the historical center of Kashan over the past two decades. In this study, rather than simplistically relying on gentrification theories to understand our case, we aimed to gain a contextual understanding of urban transformations by considering insights provided by local information and realities. The results from our observational fieldwork and interviews led to two fundamental conclusions, which also serve as starting points for further research.

Firstly, the re-territorialization of Kashan's historic neighborhoods by new users over the past two decades has not resulted in significant displacement of long-standing residents. In many cases, the requalification of the neighborhood has even enhanced the sense of attachment among long-term

residents. This suggests that these neighborhoods have been re-appropriated by their longstanding inhabitants, who have chosen to remain rather than relocate to new areas.

However, our research reveals a form of deterritorialization, specifically the displacement of Afghan immigrants and low-income tenants from buildings slated for conversion into tourist destinations. Additionally, the replacement of local retail shops with tourism-related boutiques can also be seen as a form of deterritorialization, as residents can no longer meet their daily needs within the neighborhood. These transformations, which reflect signs of tourism gentrification (Cócola-Gant, 2018; Gotham, 2005), may indicate a potential path towards future tourism gentrification or touristification (Sequera & Nofre, 2018) of the area. Nevertheless, given the uncertain political and economic conditions in Iran, which directly affect tourism and investment in the tourism sector, the future outlook remains highly uncertain.

Secondly, and in the absence of updated and systematized statistical data and the complexity of urban phenomena the use of assemblage theory has allowed us to provide a comprehensive explanation of urban transformations in the old historical neighborhoods of Kashan city center. In the light of the assemblage thinking, our research revealed that multiple urban processes are occurring simultaneously within or outside the historical neighborhoods of Kashan, including heritage conservation (or requalification), incumbent upgrading, soft forms of revitalization, initial stage of tourist gentrification, as well as suburbanization and urban sprawl. In this sense, this article has demonstrated that the use of assemblage thinking has the capacity to provide a methodological approach for understanding "the complexity of city problems and the processes through which urbanity emerges in relation to intricate socio-spatial networks at multiple scales" (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2015, p. 402).

Our research highlights the potential of assemblage theory as a valuable alternative research strategy and analytical framework for the development of decolonial, critical urban studies in non-Western contexts, where urban phenomena may not be explained through a singular universal concept.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Naimeh Rezaei: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Resources; Data curation, Writing – original draft preparation; Writing – review and editing; Visualization; Supervision; Project administration. **Jordi Nofre:** Conceptualization; Resources; Writing – original draft preparation; Writing – review and editing; Visualization.

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