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## Towards a Democratic Process in Urban Planning and Design; Assessing the Status of Citizens' Involvement in Urban Plans and Projects in Iran

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### Abstract

**Problem Statement:** it seems that in current times, many of the urban designs and plans in Iran have totalitarian, centralized, and monopolistic essences. This condition is predictably originated from the absence of deliberative and collaborative democracies; in light of the foregoing, the inefficiencies of the stages of presentation and implementation have led to neglecting the citizenship rights and the public preferences. Hence, citizens have little social responsibilities for the negative consequences of inefficient urban practices. In addition, an appropriate context is not provided for them to affect the various steps of urban processes, claiming their rights to the city, and expressing their opinions. In this spirit, the urban projects lose their basic figures in providing stability and promoting the role of people in urban development and management. Hence, the impetus behind this study is to improve the urban democracy in the process of urban planning and design.

**Purpose:** this study attempts to investigate the reasons for the lack of democratic involvement by the citizens in the process of urban development and management, as well as to find some solutions to remove this widespread deep-rooted social dilemma.

**Research hypothesis:** the realization of democracy and actual participation of citizens in the process of developing the urban spaces can lead to more accurate and efficient decision makings, as well as more successful implementation of urban plans and projects.

**Research method:** this article was conducted through content analysis and comparative methods. While studying the pillars of the democratic system, the methods of democratic participation of citizens in the processes of urban development and management in Iran was studied regarding the Principles of the Critical Theory. In fact, an effort was made to provide a platform for presenting the findings and suggested solutions through the process of criticizing and analysing the current situation of the Iranian urban plans and designs along with comparing them with the necessary elements for the realization of democratic and people-friendly urban processes. This should be stated that the data collection method was based on interviews with people, studying documents, and also field observations.

**Conclusion:** results indicate that Dilemmas in the Iranian urban system have been originated from the non-democratic factors, such as the lack of participation, the lack of all-inclusiveness, the violation of citizenship rights and urban justice, illegitimate urban laws, inflexibility, the downfall of pluralism, and etc. Hence, through scheming criteria such as the diversity of opinions, all-inclusiveness, flexibility, forming NGOs, the citizen education and discourse, diversity and respecting the citizen's rights, etc., these processes can be democratized and also a platform for the emergence of a comprehensive type of a democratic urban planning and design would be materialized; a process which strengthens the urban democracy and honors the position of people, not as the problem but as the solution, by creating equal opportunities in a disinterested fashion.

**Keywords:** *Deliberative and Collaborative Democracy, Urban Justice, Social Participation, Democratic Urban Development, the Right to the City.*

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## Introduction and problem statement

The main content of this article can conceivably be reflected in one statement: “although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it” (Popper, 2001, 25). Unfortunately, in contrary to the previous statement, totalitarian concepts with irrational natures have invariably been raised in the urban planning and design practices in two different extremist types. The first one is “Populism”, which leads to the dominance of the majority over the minority and to ignoring the rights of weaker socio-political groups. The second one is “Elitism”, which based on the concept of superior intellect leads to the emergence of monopoly in urban affairs. These two trends inevitably put the urban planning and design into an infinite regression, often resulting in futility and unproductivity.

Some current urban trends follow monopolization and partiality. This means that the dominant social groups try to customize (personalize) the public spaces (Bickford, 2000). Therefore, a large part of society turns into mere passive users of urban spaces (Sanoff, 2008, 59). Following this, the true and fundamental meaning of the citizenship concept and also the pluralism are devaluated in the absence of urban democracy in many developing countries; that is to say, the mentioned concepts are solely summarized in individualism and personal interests, and the vivid aspects of altruism, such as social ascendancy, public interests, as well as being responsible are being neglected (Purcell, 2003; 2016). Hence, these types of dissocial behaviors and egoism lead to the degradation of values such as the diversity of opinions, the variety of beliefs, and the public interests in urban processes. In the context of Iran, many similar urban drawbacks are also evident, such as the lack of flexibility and contextualism, shortage of spatial connection and continuity, poor citizen rights and public life, absence of participation, and generally, the centralization and negligence of social potentials. Now it seems that the related questions could be articulated as follows:

1. What kind of role should be taken by the people in urban plans and development processes?

2. What does democracy mean in the context of urban space development?

3. What are the contextual requirements for the realization of democracy in the city development process?

Following these questions, we can formulate the hypothesis of this article: the realization of democracy and the true participation of citizens in the process of developing the urban spaces can lead to more accurate and efficient decisions and can also result in a more successful implementation of urban plans and designs. Hence, this article seeks to illuminate whether the direct public presence, involvement, and participation in the process of urban planning and design (urbanism) are crucial and indispensable or not? If it is essential, then what are the mechanisms of democratizing the processes of urban development and management? At the next steps, this article makes an effort to understand that how we could guide the trends and processes of urban management and development towards a bilateral democratic relationship between people and authorities in the current status of Iran? In this way, by referring to the existing documents and resources and also by investigating and comparing the theories and experiences of Iran it is attempted to prove that how the direct public participation and involvement could be inevitable in urban development and management. Some solutions are also presented for the institutionalization of the democratic methods in Iranian urban management and development, in order to specifically reach a win-win situation in urban planning and design processes and gain public satisfaction.

## Background of the study and theoretical foundations

### • Democracy and its roots; philosophical and political analysis

Democracy is not a utopia; democracy means people retain their power and use it in an appropriate situation (Purcell, 2016, 397). In this case, although each person accepts that the government monitors their actions, they do not

allow the government to dominate their thoughts (Popper, 2001). Unlike Ancient Greece, today’s democracy has been expanding in various fields and categories; so it is difficult to find a single definition of it. Different social, cultural, and economic contents such as liberalism, pragmatism, relativism, conventionalism, equalitarianism, individualism, pluralism, and legal-positivism also play an important role in achieving human freedom, as well as civil and political rights (Bashiriyeh, 2013). The main points of democracy are briefly presented and discussed in Table 1, from different aspects of capitalism, ethics, education, society, etc.

Almost all non-democratic societies suffer from traditional conditions, and the lack of freedom of expression, thought, choice, and religion. This problem also prevents the development of urban societies. Consequently, it could be understood that democracy should have an inseparable relationship with ethics, education, communication, urbanization, and social solidarity, in order to lead to free interactions and participation. Furthermore, the realization of these qualities requires a civil society with collaborative democracy, and also depends upon cultural conditions and public beliefs and trust, as a way of creating humanitarian relations (Lerner, 1958).

• **Urban justice and the right to the city**

As Rawls has argued, the practical aim of justice is to provide an acceptable philosophical and moral basis for democratic institutions and to address the question of how to understand the claim for liberty and equality (Rawls, 2001, 2). The two concepts of justice and the right to the city, as the foundations of the citizenship rights and participation and involvement entitlement in the creation of the urban spaces, could pave the way for reaching urban democracy in parallel. Specifically, Henry Lefebvre introduced the concept of “The Right to the City” in 1967 and emphasized the humanistic and democratic values only for the formal citizens of a region or country. From his viewpoint, it should invariably be possible to socially reproduce the contradictory and heterogeneous urban spaces by strengthening the unified social-spatial dimension of them, away from the highlighted exchange value determined by the capitalist state. Actually, it is an approach that will enable the citizens to produce, develop, and manage the spaces with an emphasis on social and communal values and far from monopoly and authoritarianism (Lefebvre, 1991; 1996). Many researchers have recently criticized the liberal-democratic citizenship based on the power of the nation-state, with neo-liberal and capitalist social-political relations. Many seek

Table 1. The concept and the main values of democracy based on different viewpoints. Source: authors.

Theorist	Theoretical approach	Important points related to democracy	References
John Locke	Liberal democracy	Individual and public freedom\ Natural equality\ The right of being\ Public satisfaction\ Civil societies\ Peoples’ surveillance\ Public participation	Bashiriyeh, 2013; Kapeller & Pühringer, 2012
Immanuel Kant	Ethics and democracy	Freedom\ Civil laws\ Individual dignity\ Equality\ Generality	Sullivan, 2001
John Dewey	Pragmatism	Rejecting prioritization and intellectual superiority\ Democratic education\ Public opinions\ Freedom of speech	Bashiriyeh, 2013
Harold Laski	Pluralism in democracy	Community potentials\ NGOs\ Decentralization	Bashiriyeh, 2013
Harold Lasswell	Advancing Science and Democracy	Education\ Responsibility\ Decentralization	Bashiriyeh, 2013
Karl Popper	Open society	Connecting the freedom and truth like a subjective existence\ Denial of predetermined factors\ Critical look\ Freedom along with responsibility	Popper, 2001
Isaiah Berlin	Criticizing the liberalism of the 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Pluralism\ Cultural diversity\ Peaceful coexistence\ Honoring different beliefs	Jahanbegloo, 2007
Jürgen Habermas	Communicative rationality	Rational laws\ Freedom and equality\ Common understanding between collective actions\ Collective communication\ The global citizen	Habermas, 2001; 2013

to theorize the concept of the right to the city based on the current values, and many others seek to redefine the concept of urban and spatial justice in a context based on diversity, communicative rationality, and deliberative democracy.

In the completion of Lefebvre's view, the nature of these efforts have been in line with the right to the global city and urban justice and are determined based on the different characterized social and political communities constituted of different genders, ethnicities, and races consisting two components: the right to appropriate and use the global urban space and the right to directly participating in the production of it (Purcell, 2003; Soja, 2010; Fainstein, 2014). Accordingly, the right to the city can be determined by equality, participation, accessibility and utilization capability, inclusiveness, and finally collaborative and deliberative democracy on the global scale. The related theories on the concept of the right to the city and urban justice are detailed in Table 2.

**• Democratic and participatory concepts in urban practices**

At first, it should be noted that the evolution of the attitude towards citizen participation, public accountability, deliberative democracy, and the involvement of stakeholders in urban practices has lasted for decades in developed countries. According to Mäntysalo (2004), this process includes five theories which are described as follows (Table 3).

Historically, a more detailed review of democratic concepts in urban affairs can be investigated in many theoretical cases, such as the Eyes on the Street (Jacobs, 1961), the Principle of the Second Man (Bacon, 2012), the Collage City (Rowe & Koetter, 1978), Responsive Environments (Bentley, Alcock, Murrain, McGlynn & Smith, 2012), and so on. In fact, there has always been a demand for democracy in urban affairs. Actually, as long as the citizens are actively involved in the management, creation, and utilization of the urban

Table 2. The concepts of urban justice and the right to the city based on different viewpoints. Source: authors.

Theorist	Theory	Important Points	Reference
Henri Lefebvre	The right to the city	The right to appropriate and use space away from capitalism\ The right to live and use places for meetings and social interactions \ Creating a social spirit in space and the right to participate in spatial reproduction \ Violating the exchangeable and capitalist nature of space\ Emphasis on social institutions	Lefebvre, 1991; 1996
Harvey and Merrifield	Social justice and the right to the city	Citizen participation\ Preserving the rights of low-income citizens\ The equal use of public and private spaces\ The Need for mutual understanding of social justice and urbanism	Harvey & Merrifield, 2012; Fainstein, 2014
Don Mitchell	Social justice and the right to the city	Local public spaces as the platforms to acquire the right to the city and the social justice\ The right to direct social participation in the creation of space\ Space as the realm for the emergence of democracy	Mitchell, 2003
Iris Young	Social justice	De-structuring the unity of rights and justice hypothesis\ Emphasis on collective legal forms based on self-reliant and spontaneous social groups\ Emphasis on social communications relying on a sense of common identity\ Emphasis on the identity factors such as class, gender, and cultural relations	Miraftab, 2012
Edward Soja	Spatial justice	Equality, social justice, and freedom in access to human rights and facilities in space\ Perception of the right to the city as a means to achieve material equality and respect for people in different situations	Soja, 1996; 2010
Susan Fainstein	Urban justice	Emphasizing the diversity, communicative rationality based on deliberative democracy, as well as spatial justice for the emergence of urban justice	Fainstein, 2014
Mark Purcell	The right to the global city	Criticizing the neo-liberal and capitalist citizenship\ Defining the concept of citizen based on the use of space and not ownership \ Defining the right to the city for all genders, ethnicities, races, and environments\ Emphasis on the right to participate, allocate, and use the global urban space	Purcell, 2002; 2003; 2013
Toni Griffin et al.	Urban justice	Equality, choice, access, connectivity, ownership, diversity, participation, inclusion and belonging, beauty, and creative innovation as ten principles for improving the urban justice	Griffin et al., 2015

Table 3. The evolution of democratic and participatory attitudes in urban planning. Source: authors.

Theory	Essence	Important Points
Rational-comprehensive planning	Planner as the absolute decision maker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The dissociation of the observer from the observations</li> <li>- The planner as a neutral observer of the urban life and affairs</li> </ul>
Advocacy planning (formulated by Paul Davidoff)	Planner as the possessor and advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The planner as a contributor to the future development of the community</li> <li>- The planner as an advocate of both local government and other local stakeholders involved in the political process of planning</li> </ul>
Incremental planning (based on Lindbloom's theory)	Considering all opinions from stakeholders in a conservative process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The theory also called Partisan Mutual Adjustment, tried to have a fair viewpoint, but instead relied on the values of the owners of power</li> <li>- Making a reconciliation between the conflicting demands of different groups, using competition, negotiation and bargaining in two long-term and short-term time periods</li> </ul>
Communicative planning; focus on general consensus (influenced by The Theory of Communicative Action of Habermas)	Focusing on respecting the positions of all people involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In the perspective of this section, the political ambiguity and the lack of information and efficient judgment were considered to be the greatest problem of previous procedures.</li> <li>- Relying on mutual understanding and general agreement rather than personal interests</li> </ul>
Communicative planning; managing the conflicts	Solving the problem through pluralistic planning and design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Michel Foucault challenged the previous theory and explained the power not as an outer distortion but also as a factor of determining the individual perceptions and communicative relationships</li> <li>- Suggesting this theory as a shared interpretive sense-making process between participants engaged in practical conversation against the unchangeable Lifeworld of Habermas</li> <li>- Achieving conflict management in order to achieve a common and mutual horizon in pluralistic and multicultural planning and design.</li> </ul>

environment, regardless of their geographical, sexual and ethnical differences, its performance will improve. The city and the citizens are mutually affecting each other, thus, each citizen characterizes the city through the society, either efficiently or inefficiently. Therefore, the demand for an efficient democratic urban planning and design model has always been felt in a spectrum of substantial and vital fundamentals in the community; the trend which has a close relationship with participatory planning, citizen-oriented urban design, and the community planning event. In addition, it specifically contains a reasonable level of commitment, self-guidance, and self-legislation which could promote the quality of livability (Wates, 2008). All of these issues are referring to the pluralism concept as a counterpoint of totalitarianism (Hamdi, 2004, 107). The main theories related to the concept of urban democracy can be seen in Table 4.

### Methodology

This article was conducted through content analysis

and comparative methods, wherein while studying the pillars of the democratic system, the methods of citizen involvement in the process of preparing, compiling, approving, and implementing urban plans and projects in Iran were also discussed and assessed. In other words, the main approach of the current article was to utilize the proposed principles and concepts of the critical theory; in a way that the findings and proposed solutions in this article were an outcome of a critical review of the current status of existing Iranian urban plans and projects. It is worth noting that this article did not follow the political and personal ideologies of some critical theorists such as the proponents of Marxism. Furthermore, the required data were gathered through studying documents, direct interviews with people, and field observations. In fact, in this article was tried to theorize the process of attaining the urban participation and democracy which could be practical to provide a context for the emergence of some Iranian urban plans and projects in both large and small scales with more reliance on the public opinions.

Table 4. Urban criteria with democratic natures. Source: authors.

Theorist	Theory	Related criteria	Valuable consequences	Reference
Kevin Lynch	Good city form	Vitality\ Fit\ Access\ Control\ Efficiency\ Justice	Cultural continuity\ Dynamism\ Sustainability\ Environmental harmony\ Changeability	Lynch, 2011
Donald Appleyard	Planning the pluralist city	People orientation\ Universality\ Interactionism\ Feasibility	Interdisciplinary design and planning\ Participatory and pluralistic actions	Appleyard, 1979
Mark Francis	Democratic streets	Secure and free access\ Diversity\ The Possibility of Involvement and Change\ Security and Environmental Health	Increasing permeability\ Pluralism and inclusiveness\ Flexibility and Public Participation\ Environmental sustainability	Francis, 1987
Jacobs and Appleyard	Urban design manifesto	Livability\ Identity and control\ Access to opportunities, imagination, and joy\ Authenticity and meaning\ Community and public life\ Urban self-reliance/ An environment for all	Creating an all-inclusive place supporting the biological needs\ Urban comfort\ Public participation, presence, and interaction\ The responsibility and sense of identity	Jacobs & Appleyard, 1982
Francis Tibbalds	Making people-friendly towns	Mixing uses and activities\ Human scale\ Pedestrian freedom\ Access for all\ Clear designs\ Lasting environments\ Controlling changes	Achieving the humanistic values\ Physical and social sustainability	Tibbalds, 2008
Houghton and Hunter	Sustainable cities	Diversity\ Population density\ Democracy\ Permeability\ Security\ Appropriate scale\ Organic design\ Proper economy\ Creative relations\ Flexibility\ Users' consultation and participation	Freedom and right to choose\ Access to urban facilities\ Presence in open spaces\ Environmental efficiency\ Contextualism\ Variability\ Mobility	Houghton & Hunter, 2005
Mohsen Habibi	Civil society and urban life	Pluralism\ Legality\ Communication\ Participation	Dialogue exchange\ Social communications\ Consensus of different opinions	Habibi, 2000
David Brain	Physical design and the democracy	Mixing and Balance\ Clarity and Flexibility\ Nature-based Design	Pluralism\ Dynamism\ Changeability and Legibility\ Contextualism	Brain, 2006
Behzadfar and Kurdistani; Kurdistani et al.	People-oriented urban design	Efficient urban management\ Environmental welfare\ Participation in the creation and use of space\ Accessibility for all\ Freedom of movement in space	Environmental sustainability and responsiveness	Behzadfar & Mahmoudi Kurdistani, 2010; Mahmoudi Kurdistani et al., 2012
Henry Sanoff	Democratic and participatory design	Collaborative and deliberative democracies in design actions\ Constructive interactions	Considering the participation as a crucial educational value\ Public informing and involving	Sanoff, 2007; 2008; 2010
Nick Wates	Community planning events	Transparency\ Honesty\ Communication\ Flexibility\ All-inclusive involvement\ Socio-cultural contextualism	Public collaboration in preparing the local plans\ Participatory urban design and planning\ Creation of common visions\ Nurturing the collective foundation and structure\ Public awareness	Wates, 2000; 2008
Nabeel Hamdi	Community actions	Equity and efficiency in participatory works\ Human-oriented projects\ Action-based planning\ Coproduction\ Co-design	Systematic urban interactions\ Self-organized and self-helped development as the best way of making big changes	Hamdi, 2004; 2010

### Inefficient long-term and large-scale urban plans in Iran

Based on the Iranian scientific documents and history and pieces of evidence, the governance and development types of the historical Iranian urban neighbourhoods were much closer to the

standards of today's urban democracy. In fact, the local people were directly involved in the process of decision-making, designing, implementing, utilizing, repairing, and maintaining the important elements of the urban environment; such as the mosque, Bazaar (marketplace), Ab-Anbar (water

reservoir), public spaces and so forth. Although due to the lack of controlling laws, it sometimes created urban chaos, but unfortunately even this level of public intervention is not valued in urban projects nowadays.

• **Urban master plans; the commence of the modern urban planning and design in Iran**

The master plans specifically entered into Iranian urbanism system in 1968 and have been applied up to now. Until then, there was no systematic process for urban planning and design in Iran. However, these types of plans have never been in a persuasive consistency with the nature of Iranian urban systems (Behzadfar, 2013; Maghsoodi Tilaki, Azizi, Aldrin & Hedayati Marzbali, 2014). In fact, Iranian cities are intensely different from European cities. The European city has an introverted essence; its community, body, and management have a close relationship with the other elements, and the sovereignty, power, and authority are dependent on people. While Iranian cities have an extroverted quiddity, the alterations are simulative and dependent on the will of the government (Kamrava, 2013). Nowadays, these plans are proved to be malfunctioning (e.g. the totalitarian and centralized actions) because they do not support flexibility, community participation, public involvement, social life, and local contexts.

• **Urban strategic plans as the alternatives; historical rehash**

Even though the strategic plans were common in the United States in the early 1970s, they entered the Iran's urban planning and design with a delay of almost thirty years. The main concept of these plans was democracy, as well as collective wisdom, social justice, local values, and public participation (Pirzade, 2008). The first strategic urban plan of Iran was prepared for Tehran in 2007 (Behzadfar, 2013). Experts hoped that it could solve many of the urban problems, nonetheless, with the lack of civil society, public education, and informing, they encountered many obstacles. The reason of this matter is that no role or duty

has been allocated to people in any stage of these programs. While in western countries, the process of starting and also the consequences of urban projects are guided by numerous meetings and also through the discussion between the people and authorities. Nevertheless, these plans continue to be implemented in the Iranian urban planning system without compensating for the required infrastructure.

**Positional and thematic mid-term and short-term urban projects in Iran**

• **Neighborhood and habitation; Mehr housing and Navvab projects as the symbols of inflexibility, depersonalization, and social division**

Our cities should provide democratic settlements for citizens containing social sustainability. While in many cases, our communities are certainly being deteriorated due to the shortage of democratic values and vital principles related to housing issues. In this case, there are some disastrous instances, such as Mehr housing and Navvab highway projects that prove the inefficiency of Iranian urban policies.

Since 2007, a few social housing projects were considered for the middle class and low-income people in Iran. These projects pursued some important goals, such as reducing the land price, preventing urban sprawl and marginalization, and also promoting the social justice and environmental qualities, but many of these goals were not materialized (Khalili, Noorollahi, Rashidi & Rahmani, 2015, 84). In fact, Mehr complexes are often constructed in suburban areas with inflexible forms, only focusing on residential land use. These projects are populist in nature and regardless of general decision-making and justice, the authorities merely misuse the financial participation and support of people. These projects are impractical, inappropriate, and unrelated to other urban plans and projects and negatively affect the housing market; indeed, there are not

enough social and economic studies behind these projects (Barzegaran & Daroudi, 2015). After interviewing with locals, they complained about the lack of environmental attractiveness, services, and identity. Moreover, public life, social interactions, and the emotional needs of residents have been obviously neglected (Fig. 1).

In addition, Navvab project is another example of an inefficient one, declining the social sustainability of the communities. Many people consider Navvab highway as a wound on the body of Tehran. In this project, the historical background and social interactions have definitely been annihilated in surrounding residential fabric, by the monopolistic power of the mayor and urban experts. One of the main goals of this project was to use the added value, resulting from the implementation of the project, to improve the



Fig. 1. Mehr complexes consisting of sole bricks and window panes. Source: authors' archive.



Fig. 2. The spatial dissociation formed by the renovation of Navvab highway. Source: www.mashregnews.ir

quality of social life in this community; while considering Fig. 2, the construction of the highway has divided the surrounding neighborhood and community into two segregated sections with low social communications (Kamrava, 2013; Bahrainy & Aminzadeh, 2007). Now, according to Fig. 3, we can see many of the problems of this area; this area suffers from weak vitality, safety, and identity. In addition, low local potential, lack of localism, lack of public life, unrelated social and environmental contexts, and inhumane nature are visible in this area. In fact, the authorities could have counted on the opinions of sociologists and environmental experts, but they never did so. This is because of the top-down (autocratic) management system; in this case, the legitimacy of the urban management system is formed only by relying on absolute power and so accountability is only made to senior officials and people's rights are neglected in lower scales. The locals claim that they are suffering from pollution, physical exhaustion, and the lack of physical permeability, which are caused by the wrong policies and the lack of public intervention and participation. On the other hand, older people living in the neighborhood also spoke of their right to express their complaint and that they had never been granted the right to reflect their dissatisfaction with the construction of this highway. In fact, the possibility of defending the urban rights is never realized in the absence of legal elements



Fig. 3. Navvab highway as a completely totalitarian design. Source: authors' archive.



and citizens' interactions and also in the lack of the criticism and objection culture, as well as by ignoring the urban laws; in this sense, the managers are able to violate the city administration. In addition, the right to public objection against the urban decisions is taken away from the people.

• **Social urban nodes; Vali-e Asr pedestrian underpass as a non-inclusive inhumane project**

Vali-e Asr crossroad is where two historical streets of Tehran (Enghelab and Vali-e Asr) intersect each other. Before the construction of the pedestrian underpass, it was a remarkable place for social gatherings and was presumed as a practical social urban node. Due to growing traffic-related problems originated from personal motorized vehicles, pedestrians, and the public transportation, urban experts decided to construct a pedestrian underpass at this crossroad in order to provide safe and secure conditions for traffic affairs. Unfortunately, they have completely separated the pedestrians and vehicles without paying attention to the citizens' opinions and have neglected the powerful social context (Tavakolinia, Raeisi & Aghaei, 2015) (Fig. 4).

This project has weakened the public access to the surrounding open spaces. A large part of the citizens show little interest in crossing the underpass and so in addition to imposing traffic problems it also jeopardizes the safety of passersby (Fig. 5). This underpass forms a non-inclusive and inhumane place for many social groups like the elderly and people with disabilities by guiding pedestrians to the underground with eight entrances and exits,

through several escalators. The inflexible design of this project has also weakened the legibility and does not respect the citizens (Shamai, Fakhripour Mohammadi, Zanganeh & Parizadi, 2016). Public interviews indicated that the structure of the underpass has caused confusion and discomfort. Like other cases, the people mentioned that if they had a right for legal complaints, they would surely express their opposition towards this project. In fact, the conflict in the people's minds about the urban elements and the spaces is a sign of shortage in necessary information and also the contradiction of public demands and needs within the urban projects.

• **Pedestrian paths and sidewalks; Sadr project as a symbol of disregarding the pedestrians**

Urban sidewalks, social streets, and pedestrian paths are the most potential contexts for acknowledging the urban democracy and reclaiming the right to the city. Unfortunately, in recent urban actions in Iran, extreme attention is paid to vehicular access rather than pedestrians (Figs. 6 & 7). In order to meet the vehicular requirements, the authorities are inevitably focusing on redesigning roundabouts, boulevards, underpasses, overpasses, and highways. However, these arrangements cannot be a solution to compensate for traffic congestion, as a dominant and prevalent problem in our metropolitan areas. For instance, the Sadr project in Tehran is the most significant example of this issue. The mayor made a decision to construct an extra floor as an overpass on the current Sadr highway (Fig. 8). This technocratic project was brought into action



Fig. 4. Vali-e Asr Crossroad: (a) The situation of crossroad before the construction of the underpass; (b) 3D graphic design of the proposed pedestrian underpass; (c) One of the entrances of the underpass towards the underground. Source: www.isna.ir and www.meidaan.com.



Fig. 5. Unwilling to use the underpass.  
Source: www.isna.ir.



Fig. 6. A non-inclusive sidewalk with an extreme slope, low width, and inappropriate pavement. Source: authors' archive.



Fig. 7. The non-inclusive stair structure of the sidewalk neglecting the rights of disabled people. Source: authors' archive.



Fig. 8. The inhumane structure and technocratic mega-form of the two floor Sadr highway. Source: authors' archive.

without taking the preferences of the citizens and the humanistic values into account. This decision was not only able to solve the traffic problem but even questioned the urban democracy and civil interferences. As a matter of fact, urban practices should undoubtedly be more pedestrian-friendly to emphasize the urban democracy. Moreover, even in the numerable projects of our country which meet the requirements of pedestrians, the inclusiveness and humanistic qualities are ignored. In addition, during the interviews, citizens complained about the air and sound pollution, and also about the vehicular congestion in both floors of Sadr highway and its surrounding. Although it could be said that this project was built by the council which has been selected through the public votes and people are suffering from their choices, this should be

considered that elections without cultural education and also teaching the law does not guarantee the support of the of protesters' rights and is not a sign for the realization of democracy; such as the elections that run frequently on national and urban scales in dictatorial countries. So in many cases, the nature of the project correctly reflects and illustrates the passive role of users in urban spaces.

### Findings; Proposed criteria for democratic urban planning and design

Urban affairs should create a realm for forming the public spaces, supporting the social interactions and civic gatherings. These spaces ought to value individual dignity, the power of dialogue, citizen participation, etc., and finally lead to urban democracy (Brain, 2006; King, 2004). This type of

design and planning can be assumed as a solution to maintain and improve the urban affairs and its subcategories. Now, before discussing the proposed criteria, it is better to refer to the major problems of Iranian urban plans and projects that were discussed in the previous section:

- Inflexible, depersonalized, non-contextualized, inhumane, non-inclusive, totalitarian, and centralized essence of urban plans and projects;
- Undermining the concept of the right to the city, transparency and social justice in urban processes;
- Instability in the real concept of citizenship;
- The lack of powerful social infrastructures like NGOs which neglect citizen involvement, participation, and interaction in different steps of the urban processes such as decision-making, implementation, and protection;
- Neglecting the community requirements and the opinions of the citizens in urban processes;
- The lack of trust and commitment in authorities as a result of disregarding the citizens in planning and design procedures;
- The weak urban legal system ignoring the rights of citizens in order to express their objection;
- Inattention to the multidisciplinary essence of the urban trends orientation.

In actuality, the urban affairs need the conscious, free, and direct participation of people (expert or non-expert) in the process of managing the urban affairs and also in the decision-making procedure as one of the requirements of urban life depending on the responsibility of citizens, not the sovereignty of selected people (Khademalhosini & Arefipour, 2012; Brain, 2006). Unfortunately, there is no tangible connection between public preferences and the technical aspects of urban affairs in Iran; while the quality and quantity of the urban elements are considered as the symbol of different levels of acceptance of real democracy by people and authorities. Now, the basic need is those democratic criteria that can reveal an ultimate limit for highlighting a humanistic vision for the Iranian urban system and pave the way for achieving this

vision. The proposed criteria for implementing the aforementioned system are discussed below:

#### • **Paying attention to the citizens' mentality**

Using the diverse methods of citizen involvement requires the participation of different people with different mindsets. As an expert, our duty is to consider the citizens' perceptions and behaviors in urban environments. Afterward, the results should be analyzed to reassure that our design can respond well to their needs. Each person should be able to express his/her opinions to the managers and urban planners directly, whether an ordinary citizen or an expert in the related professions. Therefore, by paying attention to the behaviors and needs of citizens, individual dignity emerges (honoring the value of each person). All of these will enhance the community participation in design events, and will also reduce the dependencies on the government and other organizations.

#### • **Strengthening public life and social gatherings**

Space and community are linked to each other in a specific way. It is either difficult or nearly impossible to consider the spatial design without paying attention to its social context. In fact, urban spaces are the basis for the emergence of urban democracy, living public and everyday life, as well as a public realm for the manifestation of socio-political interactions. These valuable spatial territories are defined in order to respect individual dignity and establish discourse, interaction, vitality, dynamism, and so on. Thus, the urban spaces should be humanist with high spatial qualities and open to the public to acknowledge diverse communities, multiple experiences, and socio-cultural exchanges.

#### • **Forming powerful civil institutions to reinforce the citizenship education and discourse**

Civil institutions can be formed in the shape of various NGOs, related to different urban factors. As the name NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) represents, these organizations should operate independently from the government, relying solely on citizens both in management and financing and should have connections with all urban-associated

specialties and cover opinions from all social spectrums. These institutions have the task of monitoring the activities of urban developments and are responsible for urban planning and design matters and the organizations in charge of urban projects. Finally, the existence of civil institutions provides the active presence and involvement of the citizens, as well as the community of professional urban authorities in the process of shaping and creating their surroundings. These institutions should be autogenic and also should protect the public interests. In fact, the social network produces a common and valuable context of knowledge, including information, ideas, and skills which lead to a creative collaboration between professionals and citizens; this is a point that the act of voting is replaced by collectivism along with the negation of individual will in decision making.

By educating and promoting the awareness of citizens, the urban environment becomes important to them, causing them to make efforts in order to maintain the urban spaces. A part of the education should be done by experts with professional and impartial experiences in NGOs. These organizations follow different goals, such as encouraging citizens to pay attention to the interests of others in addition to their own ones and abandoning egoism, through educating them. In fact, there are useful methods for the actualization of the community involvement such as workshops, community design centers, design games, and etc. These methods try to raise peoples' ingenuity and diligence and have a task of fostering creative citizens with healthy minds to inject their endless creativity into urban spaces. It should not be forgotten that other institutions, such as media, can play a noticeable role in increasing the citizens' awareness. In these ways, each person can take part in defining and progressing urban spaces.

The citizenship discourse also requires face to face communication which has been raised by Tom Atlee in the format of Citizens Deliberative Councils (CDC). In these councils, public concerns

are explained by the citizens themselves. This criterion emphasizes communicational urban planning and design. NGOs have the duty of organizing meetings with the participation of all sections of the community and related and potent experts. The importance of these meetings is in shaping communications related to urban problems. This process also increases citizen responsibility by directly engaging citizens in urban projects and also reviewing and discussing comments, suggestions, and criticisms and as well as reaching a wide range of conflict management in times of crisis. The power of discourse creates an open environment as well as an open community, where everyone can express their thoughts in the most excellent way and in the context of deliberative democracy. Moreover, this issue can help revive the interdisciplinary quiddity of the decision-making process in urban affairs.

• **Determining general and legitimate urban laws**

Urban laws should be applicable, potent, transparent, inclusive, and anti-discriminatory, for facilitating and controlling the urban processes. If there are no rational laws, people will try to extract them from myths and legends. These laws should be made according to social conditions, and be accepted by citizens. So, the citizens uphold and approve the laws given that they consider those as their own, and this self-legislation leads to social unity, self-guidance, conscience, and also self-controlling. This sense of community eventually leads to social interactions and gives significance to the law, as the law does not have any actual sense in private life and only emerges in the public context. Therefore, increasing the level of participation in the context of deliberative democracy leads to better decisions and a more general and legitimate system of urban legislation. In addition to legal restrictions, the citizenship self-guidance is also needed, meaning that citizens should feel sovereign in control of their destiny. Obedience to the laws depends upon the citizenship conscience which leads to civic responsibility and promotes a sense of caring for the environments and urban spaces. In fact, the urban

laws support self-controlling in which citizens give mutual civil rights of citizenship to each other.

• **Being honest with the citizens**

The nature of each activity and action projected in urban plans and designs should be open and straightforward. This depends on the presence of different social, political, and economic levels in all scales of decision-making. For example, people should have a clear understanding of economic activities, associated with urban affairs because the required budget is coming from the tax they pay.

• **Scheming rational, emotional, and transcendental plans and designs**

Democratic spaces should affect the thinking, perception, and imagination of citizens, and at the same time should not deny the human qualities, considering that the people communicate with space directly through their wisdom, emotion, and imagination. As Kant notes, the process of recognition is neither exclusively based on the wisdom nor emotion of an individual, but it is a combination of both for everyone, a phenomenon that he calls transcendental. In fact, urban spaces can be made more attractive by simultaneously paying attention to human ratiom, emotion, and imagination. This not only increases citizen involvement, but also provides a sense of belonging, personalization, and richness and also gives a proper response to the diverse needs of citizens.

• **Contextualism and mutual respect between the city and citizen**

Respecting the city means preserving its identity, not erasing it; environmental destruction and the lack of respect towards the city and the existing context occur in an unjust social class system. The city respects its citizens as well, but only if it is designed as a livable organ and as long as it honors the socio-cultural and the environmental contextualism. This matter increases the mutual respect of the citizens towards their city. Moreover, this interaction takes place only if the citizens consider the city as their own.

• **Honoring the citizenship conscience and the**

**right to the city**

Undoubtedly, democracy relies on us. Citizens tend to distinguish the good values from bad ones through their membership in an ideal community. Conscience has been an inherent, fateful, and teachable element for distinguishing the right from wrong. Citizenship conscience is influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors which are interrelated to the city and determines the loyalty of people to the social laws and norms within the framework of civil society. In fact, the general definition of conscience can be extended to the urban affairs as it is closely associated with results of the urban planning and design projects which are affecting its efficiency. Furthermore, the right to the city in different communities should be honored without any discrimination. In fact, the possibility of using and having access to social urban spaces should be provided for all.

• **Respecting the flexibility, inclusiveness, diversity and the consideration of multiple alternatives**

The process of preparation and modification of each design should be compatible with the existing circumstances, avoiding the inflexible and unchangeable methods. This requires taking all possible aspects and options in the range of different times and places. The design or plan should be capable of responding well to the changing needs of communities. Democratic urban process values the change rather than inactivity; the city cannot be separated from its surrounding environment, so it should be able to adapt to the changes, inevitably occurring over time. The diverse urban planning and design could enhance the mutual understandings of citizens through the simultaneous management of the diverse ethnicities, cultures, and races within a democratic process. Regardless of the quantitative view on the citizen participation, the main goal is to engage people of different ages, gender, and cultures in the urban processes.

It should be reassured that each person can perform a role in the modification of urban projects,

without any prejudice. The substantive, as well as procedural components, should be assumed in decision-making. In addition, the plans and designs should be suggested through the inclusiveness and diversity. Providing different options is crucial for urban planning and design; in fact, the urban plans and designs should consider the priorities and diverse needs of different groups of people. This course requires sufficient knowledge of the urban fields and could be achieved with the right training. In addition, all citizens, participating in the community should be able to offer their suggestions based on their needs. This issue will promote public participation within reasonable limits.

### Discussion

The mentioned democratic criteria in the previous section could be presumed as a perfect perspective for our urban communities to avoid the inefficient Iranian urban projects as well as to solve their serious problems in the presentation and implementation processes. Many of the western urban communities have been traversing various levels to reach the desired limit of citizen involvement and participation, considering their civil rights in the process of urban planning and design, and this evolution continues. Hence, in our country, various steps should be taken too, in both micro and macro scales.

In fact, in spite of the centralized current structure in the macro-section of Iranian urban projects, the authors believe that with presenting some arrangements, urban democracy and decentralized structure in the micro-sections, like urban communities, could be achieved. In recent years, the civil society and various social unions have become stronger and the awareness of citizens have enhanced. In fact, people have currently become more responsive about the positive and negative effects of urban projects on their surrounding environment, thus the need to take them into account in the process of decision-making is strongly felt. Of course, it should be mentioned

that the responsiveness of the urban management system is the most important factor in the process of achieving urban democracy. Therefore, that is why some general arrangements have been suggested below for reaching the mentioned perspective and powerful communities:

- Providing valid and effective roles for inhabitants and citizens in the process of preparing the urban neighbourhoods' development program;
- Considering the direct legal role for the related NGOs in the processes of urban development, planning, and design;
- Providing opportunities for observing and judging the urban plans and designs and also to express the public opinions and objections against them;
- Holding various educational classes and workshops for citizens on urban issues by local experts in local councils;
- Conducting discourse sessions to establish and promote interactions and discussions between different groups and experts in order to reach constructive decisions regarding the formulation of urban plans and designs, as well as the methods of urban management;
- Informing and providing a free context for accessing the urban information through the managerial and financial clarification of the urban affairs;
- Strengthening the urban and civil life in the communities by designing and implementing the valuable urban spaces in order to develop the vast social interactions;
- Considering a non-prejudicial and frequent process to review and revise the urban laws in order to gain more public legitimacy and inclusiveness;
- Continuous and systematic reinforcement of the educational system at various scholastic and social levels to increase the public awareness about the urban rights, plans, designs, management, and also about the constructive public participation, as well as respecting citizenship rights such as equality and justice;
- Promoting the awareness of citizens about the

development of neighbourhoods and cities as a part of the urban development and management plans;

- The possibility of suing and seeking compensation due to inadequate response and the inefficient urban management system or the inability to estimate services and infrastructures and even physical and financial losses for the citizens.

### Conclusion

This article illuminated that the non-democratic and centralized system in urban planning, design, and management have resulted in the current inefficient status of the cities of our country. Moreover, it disregards the citizens in various aspects of urban processes. In this case, the citizens become an integral part of the problem rather than being an effective part of the solution. Indeed, in a democratic process, citizens have a sense of responsibility towards the city and the procedure of decision-making and scheming in terms of development and administration. This issue will promote the quality of urban plans and designs and also will provide a context for the realization of urban processes. In fact, in non-democratic conditions, citizens and inhabitants are turned into passive, greedy, irresponsible, non-participatory, and opportunists. This not only leads to passive public urban spaces, but also causes the degeneration of social morality. Therefore, one of the ways of getting out of this dilemma may be to provide a platform for the direct, non-conditional, and free involvement of the public, along with improving the citizen's knowledge of urban affairs. It should be remembered that each citizen plays a fundamental role in the creation of ideal urban spaces, as well as its utilization based on his/her urban rights. Furthermore, the monopolistic, technocratic, extremist and populist structures in our urban processes should be avoided; given that full control of a sector or a group always leads to a totalitarian and authoritarian form.

Also, the democratic patterns of thinking in urban professions should be promoted to foster democratic citizens, before the realization of democratic

urban trends. After that, it is possible to promote the awareness and responsibility of all involved citizens. In fact, the existence of conscious, free, active, and critical participation of citizens could reduce a large part of urban costs and problems; because a real citizen regards himself/herself as a part of the process of development and protection of the city and its contents. Therefore, democracy conducts dispersed and non-aligned people to shape a coherent and constructive unity. Hence, the non-democratic and non-spatial nature of urban elements and even authorities and citizens is the most destructive disaster for the comprehensive urban development practice.

Now it is perceptible that democratic processes of urban design and planning require laws which should be clear, fair, and acceptable. Through these urban laws, as well as NGOs, citizens gradually and directly can participate in the process of proposing, implementing, and evaluating urban designs and plans. In light of this issue, these plans can be flexible and distinct, and can equally respect humans' ration, emotion, and imagination in an interactive way. In this way, this process should create equal opportunities for various income classes in the communities, regardless of their social, economic, and political status. Based on these results, the democratic urban planning and design can be defined as an interdisciplinary process relying on the fundamental principles of democracy which is formed by a consistent civil society and just urban laws for the conflict management, in accordance with democratic beliefs of the citizens and their democratic character. Powerful communities as the places of active citizen participation have made meaningful opportunities for everyone, strengthening social relationships, and causing people to function and move towards the same goal. Consequently, there would be no legitimate, accurate, and practical results and projects unless involving the citizens and their interests and conflicts, regardless of their level, rank, and expertise in all steps of planning

and design. In fact, all of these cases can enlighten the definition of democracy in the sphere of urban spatial development processes, as well as providing the required conditions for the realization of democracy in the urban planning and design processes. As the final words, the materialization of democracy and real public participation of people in urban developments can lead to more accurate decisions and more accomplished implementations of urban plans and designs.

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### Endnote

1. The theory of Charles Lindblom is based on the gradual and step by step developments, policies, and decisions.
2. See: Atlee, 2003.
3. See: Kant, 2000.

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