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Rethinking Iranian Housing , Tehran example

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Abstract

Housing in the private sector in the metropolitan of Tehran is very much tied to economical considerations these days. The current urban and building standards and regulations have very much contributed to the undermining the many scenic, environmental and visual potentials of the neighborhoods and to what we have today as congested apartment atmosphere many where and the monotonous character of the many neighborhoods around the city as a result of the very same plans and regulations they have been designed from namely the setbacks, land coverage ratio and floor to land area ratio; with no regard to very different characters many of these neighborhoods once had, either traditional and long-established or scenic and natural. The purpose of this paper is to briefly review the current state and trend of housing in Tehran and search for practical measures to improve the environment and character of urban housing in the city.

Introduction

The Iranian society had many challenges in the recent decades; the political climate, social status and in our discussion their economy and housing environment. Bearing in mind the dynamic and sophisticated nature of the relationships between individuals and groups in different circumstances, and their ability to respond and adapt to many of these changes and new principles, one can notice that the society had to reevaluate and reconsider a lot in a relatively short amount of time. Moreover this could be regarded as part of the recently acknowledged 'crisis of identity' which has become a major concern in and experienced among various groups among the society.

Tehran, among the major Iranian cities has experienced the largest population growth in the recent decades creating many demographic and social changes. Many new residents arrived in the city to seek for new jobs and opportunities during the economic growth while some had to take refuge having left their homes in the border cities and provinces during the war with neighboring Iraq and started their new lives in Tehran many of whom never returned, all contributing to the very diverse character of the capital being home to people from all around the country from very different backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles and in some cases languages.

At the present the population growth is down to a very low rate nevertheless we are witnessing the significance of the previous population growth now after the generation is matured. Many constructions happened around the city and many apartments were built to respond to the ever increasing housing demands. Followed by the economy, it led to very high rising land prices in the city during the last decade, which for most of people living in apartments was not an option but rather inevitable.

What happens is the likely discontinuity among the neighbors coming from different communities and cultures and now living in the same apartments, disclosing itself in various types of disorder. Coming from different backgrounds, many of the residents used to live in single houses with yards or gardens while many others have lived in big families with different types of living arrangements, now all living in the same new environment, the apartments. However the contemporary apartment environments and the current concept of housing do not fulfill many of the residents' desires. Many architectural, environmental and more importantly cultural thoughts are not given consideration rather only for the solemn priority of providing affordable and structurally reliable housing.

Keywords:
urban
housing, land
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master plan
(*tarh-e tafzili*)

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After years people have adopted some behavior of living in apartments new to many of them. But still it is obvious that they are compromising a lot for living in such apartment places, many of it is not necessarily related to the size of the apartment. Children have no space to play outdoors; families do not have opportunity to enjoy their meals in the balconies or terraces like they used to nor they can have many big family parties and customs such as those of cooking get-togethers or habits like sleeping outdoors during the warm seasons.

Although some of the above-said activities cannot be practiced as extensively in big apartments as it is in houses in the contemporary twenty or so unit apartments in Tehran but on the other hand the new common housing examples provide the least and just the basic requirements for the households. The current trend in housing challenges many architectural, social and environmental principles in compromise for the economic considerations.

The situation in the private sector housing development in the metropolitan area is very much tied to the land market and the return of the profit. Currently it is not easy for the designers to pursue with their space exploring ideas while they are very much demanded for designing most area as possible, unless the client or developer looks for something beyond the immediate financial return of his money, otherwise they often have no choice other than come up with the very routine arrangements for the apartment blocks they are asked to design, rather the apartments have been treated too much as investments rather than housing environments; while this includes many apartments in the upper town as well in its own terms.

With the current state of the housing market, designs for the apartments which seek to explore the identity of Iranian house is not much expected to be accomplished unless into some interior extend. The designers can only explore their ideas within the already decided frame for designing the apartments as to be in some certain size and shape, or mostly on their design for the facades. In this situation the very remains of the land in urban plots in almost every apartment will practically lead to a left green space and unsuccessful mock of a garden where in most of cases will not been taken care of after all.



Figure 1. New development beside the contemporary, open spaces are absent in the urban blocks.

Tehran Master Plan

The current master plan and city planning law have very much contributed the many destruction of scenic, environmental and visual potentials of the neighborhoods around the city and for what we have now a congested apartment atmosphere and the monotonous character of the many streets and neighborhoods throughout the city as consequences of the very same urban regulations implemented for them namely the setbacks, land coverage ratio and floor area ratio with no regard to very different characters many of these neighborhoods have, either traditional and long-established or scenic and natural now all being vulnerable to lose their identity to the very same character, and that of what the land prices dictate. Here one can note the lack of awareness and inability to assess the historical, traditional and environmentally values in the wake of ever rising land prices and economic development having the opportunity to take advantage of the house and apartments as very good sources for profit, which especially the last has been possible due to the planning laws and provisions not responsible and unique to the every neighborhood.



Figure 2. Incoherent development results in disharmony, visual disorder, walled facades and chaos in the neighborhoods.

One of the measures taken to deal with the ever increasing demand for housing was what argued to be the need to renovate the old sections of the city during the last two decades was the chance to purchase extra floor area aggregate, which attracted many developers and property owners to reconstruct their properties and enjoy the new incentives. Sadly this new legislation has been applied to almost every neighborhood with no further amendments. As a consequence it caused a lot of disorder in the characters of neighborhoods throughout the city after many of the owners took advantage of the new regulation to benefit the most since more area would naturally mean more profit. Gradually the city has been filled with bulky and box-shaped apartments where the earlier character of Tehran houses and apartments are hard to trace. Spaces such as big terraces or balconies where people would hang out or sit during the summer or simply put their vegetation outside are no longer visible in the new developments as they would counted much less the area as if it was indoor which means less profit. What is inferior is the gradual disappearance of the backyard space in the apartments later where the buildings had to recess from the neighboring plots, but now are allowed to occupy parts of this space too; again, more walled facades and surfaces the neighbors are exposed to since there cannot be windows on the walls abutting the neighboring plots, and all these apartments fully touch their boundaries, except few centimeters required by law.

Many of the neighborhoods have had their unique character like Yousef Abad, Evin or Narmak, sadly no exceptions in the road for so called renovation and also have been filled with apartment blocks tied to one another and to the street like everywhere else, so that their earlier layouts are hard to note.

Many apartment blocks which were built more than two decades ago had a strong character and an accommodating space for many activities in harmony with their residents' expectation many of which vocabulary can no longer be appreciated in their new counterparts.



Figures 3 and 4. Apartment blocks built around two decades ago, in harmony and respect with their context. Voids, setbacks and open spaces such as terraces and balconies are much more to be appreciated here.

Recently more apartments can be noticed where the façade has been added new vocabulary or their internal arrangement have actually been thought for and some again have challenged the idea whether they should bear meanings beyond that of a merely urban settlement despite the tight and demanding market for massive and straight-forward spaces which make the biggest indoor spaces.

There are lately activities for reviving and/or defining the Iranian houses and apartment by trying to look for what has been there for many years and try to fit the activity into the new context and to the contemporary reality and way of living in the metropolitan. While many cases been merely imitating the traditional motives and materials into their facades, others have been successful. However concepts such as intimacy or privacy and transitional spaces have been disappearing in the apartments, what used to essential vocabulary in one Iranian's house, not least of all open spaces and courtyards, now a mere patio for light.

In some areas of Tehran currently, before the implication of the new detailed city planning law developers are given more floor area ratio aggregate as an incentive once they have certain setbacks from the street boundary and in some areas would have to go up in a pyramid shape to allow for light into the streets. As much as it is a relief for the street and the neighbors to enjoy a little more space and light in their street and having one less walled façade around, on the other hand could possibly, if not considered thoroughly, add to the visual chaos the street under the current situation, not to mention it adding more traffic to the already busy street.



*Figure 5.
A pyramid
shaped high
development in
northern Tehran.*

Detailed Plan (*tarh-e tafzili*)

Tehran has been waiting for its detailed and extensive city planning law for almost forty years. This year, finally, it has been legislated this year and is expected to be implemented by the municipalities in the metropolitan. Until now the very same and brief regulation has been applied to almost every district and neighborhood throughout the city, except very handful neighborhoods which have their own specific planning laws such as *Shahrak-e Gharb*.

The latest soon to be put into practice detailed plan, or what can be interpreted as city planning law of Tehran could be regarded as a chance to protect and maybe to improve those left neighborhoods of the city from the huge scale development, if fully supported and implemented, of course. The first step, I believe, is to fully apply and introduce the new Tehran master plan as the new requirement which has a more sensitive approach to planning the neighborhoods around the city.



Figures 6 and 7. Apartments and houses zones in *Shahrak-e Gharb*, Tehran.

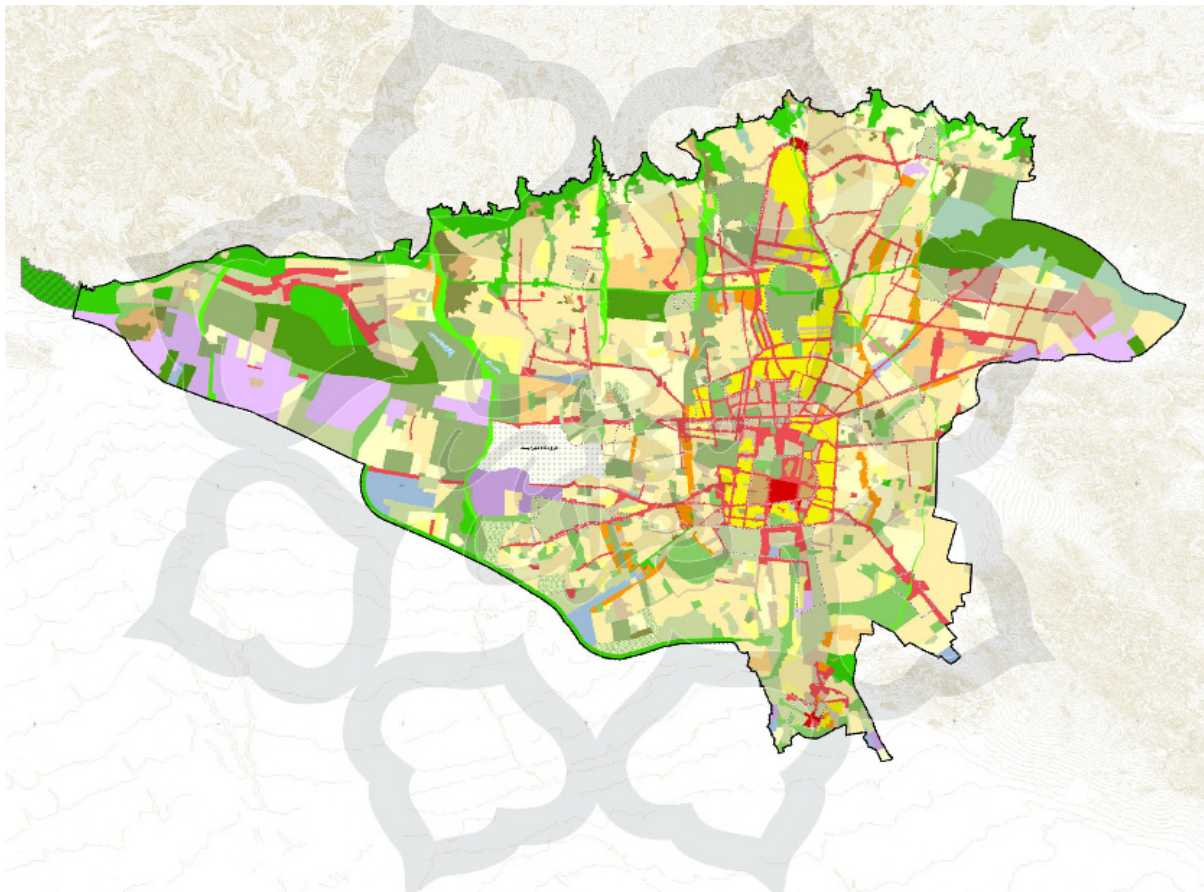


Figure 8. New detailed plan (*tarh-e tafzili*) of Tehran; Areas in yellow, cream or brown are designated as various residential zones, in addition to small areas painted dark-green as for Green Valuable Residential Zone.

In the new detailed plan (*tarh-e tafzili*) the total Residential Zone is estimated 248 sq. kilometer and has been defined as two main categories 1) General Residential Zone and 2) Specific Residential Zone, each one further subcategorized; General Residential Zone into Low-density (R11), Medium-density (R12) and High density (R13) Residential Zones. further details are as follow:

1-digit code	Major Zones	2-digit code	Zones	Sub-zones 3-digit code	general character of sub-zones	maximum floor area ratio	number of floors	maximum land cover ratio
R1	General Residential	R11	Low Density Residential	R111	Single story/ double story residential	120%	2	60%
				R112	3-story residential	180%	3	60%
		R12	Medium Density Residential	R121	4-story residential	240%	4	60%
				R122	5-story residential	300%	5	60%
		R13	High Density Residential	R131	6-story residential	360%	6	60%

Table 1. The General Residential Zone (area of 197 sq km) has been categorized into areas where different number of floors can be constructed:

One-story and two-story residential 1063 hectares; 3-story 4525 hectare; 4-story 11018 hectare; 5 story 1772 hectare; 6 story 1350 hectare.

1-digit code	Major Zones	2-digit code	Zones	Sub-zones 3-digit code	general character of sub-zones	maximum floor area ratio	number of floors	maximum land cover ratio
R2	Specific Residential	R21	Rural valuable Residential Context	R211	Single story/ double story residential	120%	2	60%
				R212	3-story residential	180%	3	60%
		R22	Historical valuable Residential Context	R221	4-story residential	240%	4	60%
				R222	5-story residential	300%	5	60%
		R23	Contemporary valuable Residential Context	R231	6-story residential	360%	6	60%
		R24	Green valuable Residential Context	R241	Less than 2000 sq m	-	2	10%
	R242			Between 2000-5000	-	3	7.5%	
	R243			More than 5000	-	4	7.5%	
	R25	Special Central Zone Residential	R251	Central Zone Residential	250%	5	50%	
	R26	Special Urban Axes Zone Residential Context	R261	7-story residential	280%	7	40%	
R262			9-story residential	315%	9	35%		
R263			Special Residential (high rise)	600%	12 and more	30%		

Table 2. The Specific Residential Zone categories.

However there are provisions too in the new detailed master plan for an extra floor added to the buildings (or in R26 subcategory two stories) in return for lessening the building coverage area and yet there are maximum 60% land coverage area on General Residential Zones, and no provision for spaces around the plots. In each of the above mentioned categories different floor area ratio, building coverage and numbers floors has been specified.

The Specific Residential Zone has been introduced as those of natural, historic, cultural, and of identity or any specific area where has its own specifications. (*peyvaste 8, tarh-e tafzili-e Tehran*)

For Specific Residential Zone (R2) in area of 51 sq.km there are 6 subcategories; Valuable Rural (R21), Valuable Historic (R22), Valuable Contemporary (R23), Valuable Green (R24), Valuable Central District (R25) and Urban Axes Districts (R26).

Conclusion

Sustainable development of Tehran lies under an extensive and responsible city regulation to promote generations' meaningful connection with their living environment. The definition of the 'Iranian Home' lies under and is to be protected within its new setting. This is the responsibility of the planners and designers to protect and respect the urban environment by protecting it from negligence and deterioration in compromise for mere economic values.

There are yet no setbacks or minimum distances required in the new legislated *tarh-e tafzili* or detailed plan of Tehran. The most significant change here is the final recognition of different characters of the neighborhoods and stipulating specifications for each zone regarding maximum floor area ratio and maximum land cover ratio. Therefore it is unlikely to yet change the already tradition of stretching the buildings to all sides of the plots and leaving no open spaces around.

Once the Detailed Plan is implemented, fully and responsibly, the first step will be taken in controlling the density, scale and sights of the neighborhoods from further deterioration. Later more considerations should be necessary for concepts such as open or outdoor spaces to improve the atmosphere throughout the residential districts in the metropolitan.



*Figure 8.
New
developments on
the hillside in
Northern Tehran
at the distance;
high rise
apartments with
no regard to the
natural character
of the locale.*

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