
TRANSFORMATION OF PLACE-IDENTITY; A CASE OF HERITAGE AND CONFLICT IN IRAQ

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Throughout history, war and conflict have caused fundamental political, economic, and social transformations around the world, spatially impacting urban form. Nowhere is this more evident than in cities with distinctive identity and a rich historical landscape. Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region is such a city. Increased political and economic stability after the 2003 invasion of the country has led to a period of reconstruction as a part of the recovery process from decades of war. This has empowered an array of urban actors that have influenced the transformation of the city's place identity. In this paper the consequences of planning mechanisms and strategies on the transformation of place-identity was analysed through four time periods using the city of Erbil as a case study. The discussion has shown that place-identity in the post conflict period has transformed rapidly. This transformation has negatively impacted local place-identity as many areas have lost links with their historical past and are embracing anonymous micro-identities. Although the government encourages and provides opportunities for new modern developments, there is an urgent need for holistic planning and urban design strategies that could guide future developments to reflect and respect heritage values, tradition and culture. The study has found that cities in post-conflict context need comprehensive strategies that could adapt to the political and economic changes in order to guide the reconstruction process.

Keywords

Place-identity, Transformation, Architecture, Planning, Erbil, Kurdish, Iraq, Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

Most towns and cities have their own character and identity, which distinguishes one place from another. Place identity is related to the quality of a place being unique and rooted in local context.¹ Although the concept of place-identity is engrained in history, it is neither static nor uniform.^{2,3} It is the result of a continuous evolutionary process through the interaction of human and place during different cycles of civilisation.^{4,5} This process is constantly influenced by the dynamic changes of social, political and economic forces over time.⁶ One of the crucial factors that shape place-identity is heritage⁷ as it represents the values and traditions of the past within the present, while reiterating the sense of national and regional identity.⁸ Hence, it is strongly linked with nation building and national identity. For example, the Acropolis in Athens is a symbol of Greece and the national identity of Athenians.^{9,10}

Throughout history many nations have consisted of different ethnic and cultural groups sharing the same geographical place. Some of these groups are considered minorities despite their distinctive culture, history and local identity¹¹. Often their culture and identity is neglected, changed, or destroyed when different political ideologies practiced by a dominant ethnic group exist, and thus creating conflict. However, this attack on identity is not only on the human level, it also includes an assault on traditions and historical values, heritage sites, and architecture.¹² Once the situation stabilizes, reconstruction begins as part of the post-conflict recovery process.¹³ This includes political, social and economic changes, which in many cases results in the transformation of character and identity of place. Often less resilient and responsive to the local context, this evolving place-identity may threaten the local urban fabric. The Kurdish minority and the city of Erbil in Iraq are clear examples of such a situation and are the focus of this paper.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without a state that shares a common and distinct culture, traditions, language, and identity.^{14,15} The geographic area they inhabit, Kurdistan is divided between four countries; Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. However, it doesn't have an official boundary and is not an internationally recognised state.^{16,17} In Iraq this area is also shared between different ethnicities such as, Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmens, with Arabs being the politically dominant majority. Iraq was established as a Kingdom in 1920, a period where Kurds were involved in political and military conflict with the Arab government to protect their right to practice their culture and maintain their identity.^{18,19} When the country became a republic in 1958, the national government's provisional constitution recognised Kurds as equal citizens for the first time.^{20,21} This national government was later overthrown by a Baa'thist coup in 1963²² and introduced Pan-Arabism,²³ forcing all non-Arab ethnicities including Kurds to comply with the Arab way of life and culture.^{24,25} These Arabist ideologies and policies resulted in nearly five decades of armed conflict, genocide, mass executions and human rights violations towards the Kurds. The city of Erbil, the focus of this research, is a source of identity and pride amongst the Kurdish nation. In addition to the physical fabric of the Citadel, a world heritage site, the city has a symbolic link to the intangible heritage of the Kurds. Moreover, Erbil has gone through different periods of governance, as well as armed and political conflict and represents the capital of an emerging nation.²⁶

This paper examines the link connecting place identity, planning and conflict by discussing the transformation process of place-identity in four main historical phases of Erbil's development. It further explores the influence of planning and urban design regulations on place-identity in each time period. Furthermore, the selection of time periods reflects the political shifts influencing planning mechanisms, consequently impacting place-identity within urban form. The first period under study covered the city's early history before 1920. It was then followed by a period in which the area was under the Iraqi Monarchy from 1920 to 1958, and then during the republic of Iraq when the city was mostly influenced by the political system of Baa'th government. Finally, the study looks at the period of autonomy from 1991 to the present and how urban planning and design impacted place-identity within the post-conflict reconstruction process.

To examine this process, the research used in-depth morphological analysis²⁷ on site in Erbil, supported by discourse analysis of 47 semi-structured interviews with various with key stakeholders. The goal was to explore their perceptions of place identity, their involvement in the planning system and the development process. Additionally, the morphological analysis included the review of historical maps, current and historic master plans, photos and review of planning policies and documents in order to understand how the political conflict influenced the planning and urban design mechanism and consequently transforming place-identity through time within Erbil's urban fabric

EARLY HISTORY: THE CITADEL

Erbil is roughly 6000 years old and originated from a surviving ancient settlement called the Citadel. This area is thought to be the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the world and is built on top of an artificial mound raised up by the process of building and rebuilding of structures in a form that has evolved naturally over thousands of years.²⁸ It represents layers of multiple civilisations from the Neo-Sumerian times when the first courtyard housing typology first appeared until the end of the Ottomans empire in 1918.²⁹ Therefore, the urban fabric of city was subject to various planning laws and regulations ranging from the organic development of urban fabric based on people's socio-economic needs to the adoption of Islamic planning principles. However, most of the existing urban structure of the Citadel mostly relates to the period of Ottoman Empire.³⁰

The morphological analysis showed that the citadel's alleyways, paths and open spaces represent the character and identity of the Citadel in terms of its irregular but distinctive form. This network represents a unique organic urban fabric connecting a hierarchy of urban spaces, transitioning from public to semi-public to private (Figure 1). This complex pattern developed in order to avoid crossing enclosed spaces, to establish transitional spaces, and to provide privacy for the inhabitants. The character of the alleyways is the result of a multitude of individual and family decisions on how each house should look and reflects their lifestyle, financial capability and social needs. Additionally, families were responsible for maintenance and the management of the alleyways rather than a public authority. Therefore, the network of the alleyways evolved organically, the exact opposite to the planned approach in which everything is pre-determined by planners, architects, or urban designers before it is built.

The plots in the Citadel developed in an organic pattern from the main gate in the south and then gradually covered the whole Citadel area. The plots are mainly residential with few non-residential plots such as public bath (Hammam) and mosques. Therefore, plot patterns evolved and transformed over centuries based on the socio-economic needs and interests of resident's. Hence, they vary in size, shape, width, and coverage areas allowing for a diverse demographic spectrum. The Citadel also includes various types of housing such as larger mansions for the rich called Diwakhana and Iwans³¹, as well as smaller traditional courtyard houses. As privacy was an important element of cultural identity, traditional houses had large windows overlooking their courtyards instead of the external alleyway (Figure 1). Meanwhile, only small ventilator openings were placed at high levels of these walls in order to protect the privacy of the inhabitants. Therefore, courtyard typologies were environmentally and socially responsive to the residents. As mentioned in the World Heritage nomination dossier³²: *"The Citadel of Erbil is a rare surviving example of an urban ancient settlement which developed on an archaeological tell, following layer by layer and time after time, a spontaneous, non-planned growth that was influenced by a combination of previous urban layouts and successive architectural and urban elements, in a continuous process of addition and transformation extending back at least 6000 years, to the earliest phase of urbanism."*



FIGURE 1 Erbil Citadel urban fabric and courtyard housings.

Although the city started to slowly grow around the mound in the 12th century,³³ the Citadel still remained the heart of Erbil, as it is a symbol of Kurdish history and culture. It tells the story of how hundreds of past generations interacted with their natural environment and how they developed a way of life based on their socio-cultural values and needs. This next stage in the growth of the city represents the old town of the city and will be discussed in the following section.

ERBIL UNDER THE MONARCHY: THE OLD TOWN

The initial development of the old town marks the first expansion of Erbil outside the Citadel to the lower plain and is the area around the citadel mound, which developed in the 12th century near the southern main gate (Figure 2). It initially started with the main bazaar and then grew to include a mosque, a cemetery, and a school, as well as residential structures.³⁴ The urban structure of the area developed following a similar pattern as the Citadel's urban fabric. This area includes four main neighbourhoods (Mustawfi, Khanaqa, Taajil, and Arab). The Arab neighbourhood is considered to be the oldest settlement outside the Citadel with the largest number of heritage buildings located within the old town (Figure 3).³⁵ The morphological analysis of the Arab neighbourhood is characterised by a pattern of narrow, irregular alleyways and streets with cul-de-sacs, most of which did not allow vehicular access. Like the Citadel, this network was either planned by the residents of surrounding dwellings to provide access or emerged over time as a result of incremental growth. With the absence of a planning system, the plots within this area also developed diverse land usage including institutional, commercial and mixed use due to its location next to the main Bazaar.

Historically, residential plot patterns developed based on decisions by individuals and families whose private socio-economic interests transformed the typology of residential plots over time. The range of different plot sizes resulted in a socially diverse neighbourhood with various family sizes from different socio-economic backgrounds living and sharing the same area, which encouraged social cohesion. Similarly, the buildings were initially developed based on individual needs following similar typologies that existed in the citadel. The prevalent building typology was the historic courtyard brick house of one or two stories. The layout of the residential dwellings was influenced and characterised by many factors, such as climatic conditions, availability of local building materials, construction methods, and social values. However, this started to change towards the mid 20th century.

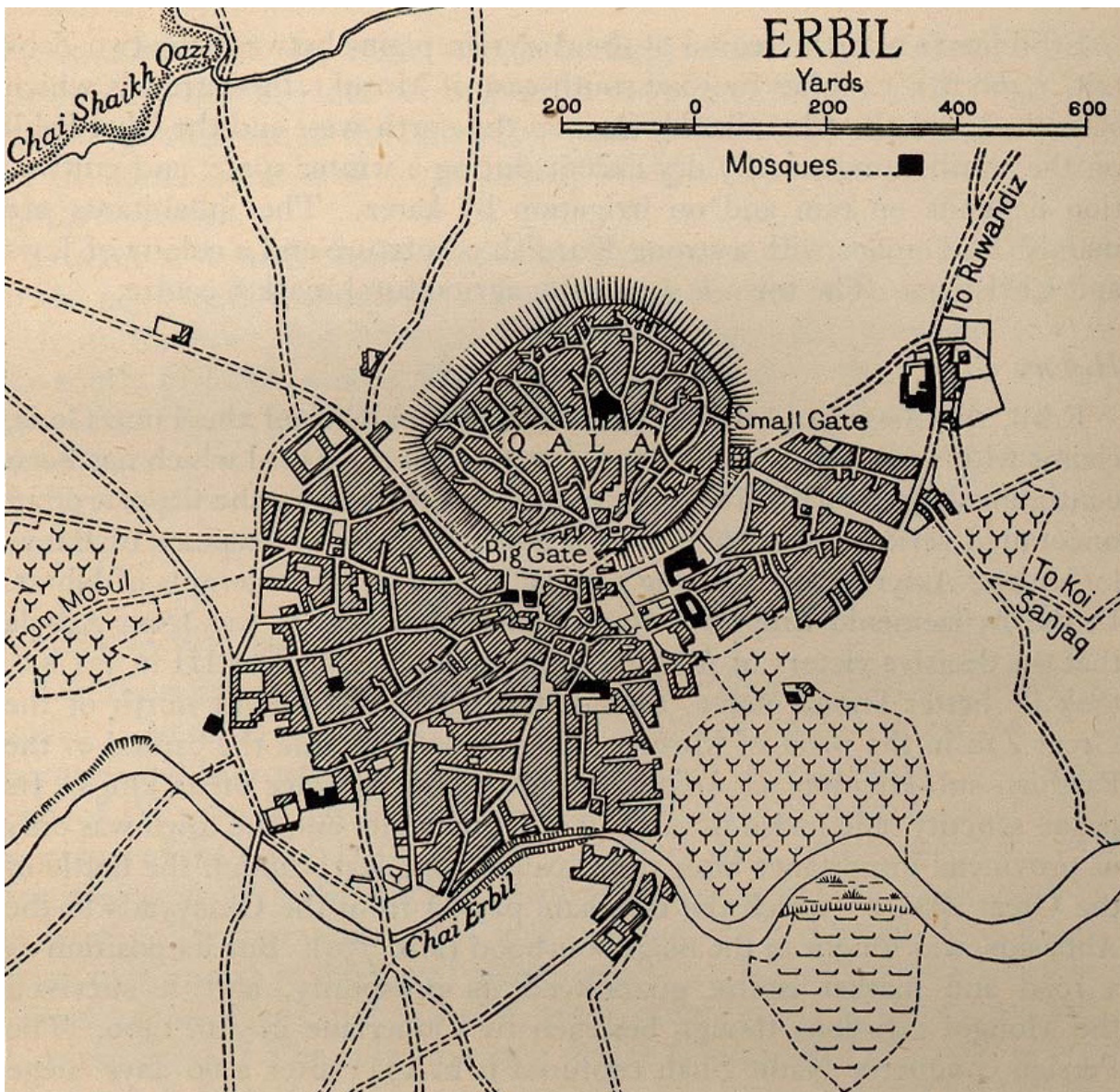


FIGURE 2 Erbil map of 1944. It shows the first expansion of the city outside the Citadel, which was towards the South where the main gate is located.

In 1920 Iraq was established as a monarchy under the British mandate after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.³⁶ Colonial administrations and the Iraqi authorities replaced the Ottoman system. This period witnessed the establishment of the national authorities of Iraq in which the planning system started to develop mostly based on the British town planning principles.³⁷ Also, the majority of projects were developed by international firms until the 1930s when Iraqi architects educated in western countries returned from abroad and started to practice, first in Baghdad and then elsewhere in the country. All town planning and development strategies as well as building regulations were decided by the central authorities in Baghdad and applied elsewhere in the country ignoring the culture, tradition and heritage for minorities.³⁸

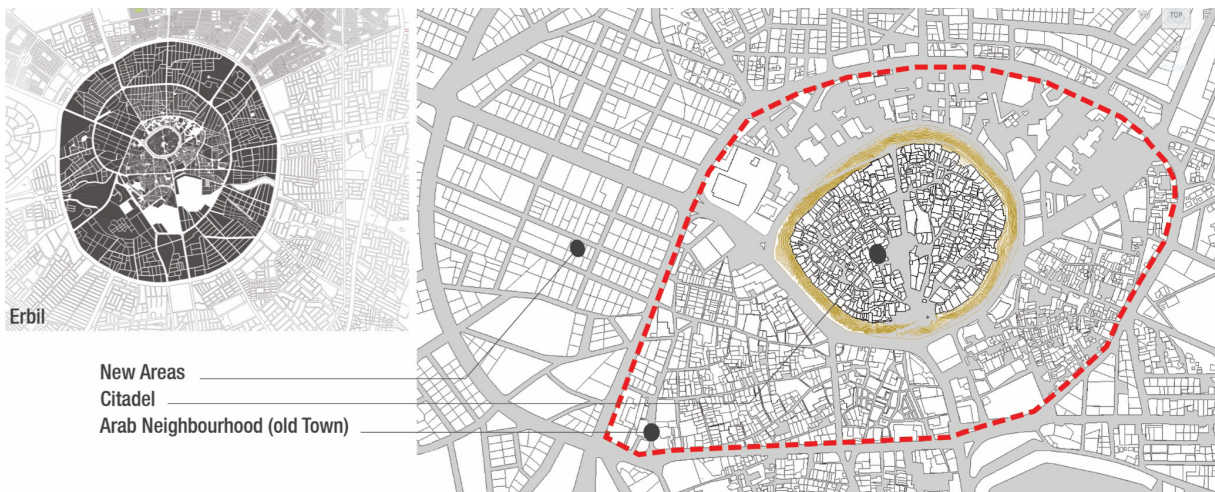


FIGURE 3 Existing map of Erbil showing the city growth from the old town. The area beyond the old town shows a departure to an international planning system despite the circular growth pattern of the city.

In the 1950s comprehensive town planning proposals were developed by Doxiadis, a globally scaled planning firm, for Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk and Erbil. These proposals ignored the existing urban fabric rather than expanding and adapting to it. For example, Erbil's master plan proposal was modular grid system of streets cutting through the existing urban fabric and ignored the original circular growth of the city.³⁹ Therefore, the irregular plot pattern of the old town slowly transformed and evolved to a more regular geometric shape as shown in (Figure 3). This was accompanied by the appearance of new building typologies, a departure from the semi-organic plot pattern and the traditional courtyard dwellings. New houses began to be constructed by high and middle-income groups, who started to vacate their old traditional houses in the Citadel as the area became dilapidated due to the lack of conservation and upgrading programmes by the government. The new buildings were considered to be modern as they followed western styles of architecture. New developments followed patterns from different parts of the country as well as international western design ideologies.⁴⁰ Furthermore, there was a high demand for commercial and business uses because of the area's location in the city centre, which resulted in high land values. Consequently, many residential buildings transformed incrementally to non-residential usages such as mixed-used, commercial and retail. In addition to adopting Western design ideologies the use of imported material from outside regional and national boundaries started to appear, as did the loss of the neighbourhoods local character.

The old town and particularly its southern part indicate that Erbil's identity and sense of place was first and foremost based on the Citadel. In interviews conducted by the author with residents, many indicated that the Citadel was a source of pride and gave a sense of belonging, especially after becoming an international World Heritage site in 2014. As one elderly man said, "I feel nostalgic about the Citadel because my parents and grandparents were born there. I feel my roots are from the Citadel and that I belong here. It makes me feel proud to live in Erbil and to be Erbili" This discussion showed that Iraqi architecture and city planning was largely the product of international consultants and reflected typical patterns of modern British town planning principles. The central authorities adopted this international planning system for the development of urban fabric as part of the country's modernization process. These planning and urban design policies and regulations were first applied in Baghdad, then to other cities such as Mosul and Erbil.⁴¹

Although the city later developed radially beyond the citadel and the old town, the urban fabric started to dramatically change towards the end of the twentieth century. This was due to different political ideologies, design standards and the application of national planning policies that had an impact on the economy, culture and lifestyles of the people inhabiting the area. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

ERBIL UNDER THE REPUBLIC: NEW AREAS

Iraq became republic in 1958, however, this government was overthrown by the aforementioned Baa’thist coup in 1963.⁴² Decades of Baa’th party rule influenced many aspects of the country, including planning and urban design policies, processes, and architecture. While the historic urban fabric in Iraq was the result of the evolution of different layers of ethnic cultures and civilizations, Arabic and Islamic towns was considered the national architectural heritage of the country. Planning regulations and building codes were developed by the central government and applied all over the country. For example, the master plan for Erbil was prepared in Baghdad with little input from local officials and no civil society involvement.⁴³ Consequently, this has resulted in inadequate urban planning policies and frameworks that does not respond to local socio-cultural needs and priorities. Therefore, applying Arab national policies and development patterns in the region attempted to manipulate and change the local place-identity of the area, following colonial visions imposed early in the twentieth century. The traditional urban fabric of old towns and cities were demolished or replaced in the Citadels in Kirkuk and Erbil and other parts of the Kurdish area.⁴⁴

Consequently, areas which developed beyond the Citadel and the lower old town in Erbil, contrasted with the traditional urban fabric that the city had acquired for centuries. However, the city maintained its radial growth pattern (Figure 3). For example, street networks were developed using grid system reflecting national planning principles while plot typologies transformed from irregular semi-organic shapes with diverse sizes to regular geometric shapes with a limited variety of plot sizes targeting particular demographic groups based on their social and financial level. This was obvious in the development of various new neighbourhoods such as the ‘Engineering neighbourhood’ and the ‘Teachers neighbourhood’. Furthermore, building typologies marked a departure from traditional brick courtyard houses, which reflected socio-cultural needs as opposed western style houses without courtyards and the use of imported building materials and techniques. Hence, the local place-identity of Erbil started to change gradually as you move out from the Citadel and beyond the city centre.

ERBIL UNDER AUTONOMY: POST-CONFLICT

During this period the city gained political significance as the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan when the region became autonomous. However, the city was characterized by very limited development due to a decade of severe economic downturn resulting from both international and national sanctions. With autonomy came a period of economic growth when the Baa’th government was overthrown by the coalition forces.⁴⁵ This resulted in political stabilization accompanied by rapid economic growth in the region due to oil revenues, an active private sector, and United Nations support for rebuilding the area, transforming the city into a hub for investment, trade, tourism, and development in the region. This stability allowed the Kurdish government to develop and upgrade the region’s infrastructure and has altered the urban fabric in the region, particularly in Erbil.⁴⁶

One of the first directives of the new government was to restore and preserve the Citadel as it represents the heart of Erbil, it’s identity and sense of belonging.⁴⁷ Consequently, the significance and the uniqueness of it’s distinctive historic urban fabric and architectural vernacular have focused efforts to have it included in UNESCO’s list World Heritage Sites in 2014.⁴⁸ In an attempt to make the Citadel a historical and cultural hub of the modern city of Erbil, a set of detailed planning and urban design guidelines are developed as part of the extensive conservation and rehabilitation implementation by the Kurdistan Regional government in collaboration with UNESCO.⁴⁹ Today the Citadel stands at the centre of the city of Erbil, both physically and symbolically, with the city expanding in concentric rings, following its origin.

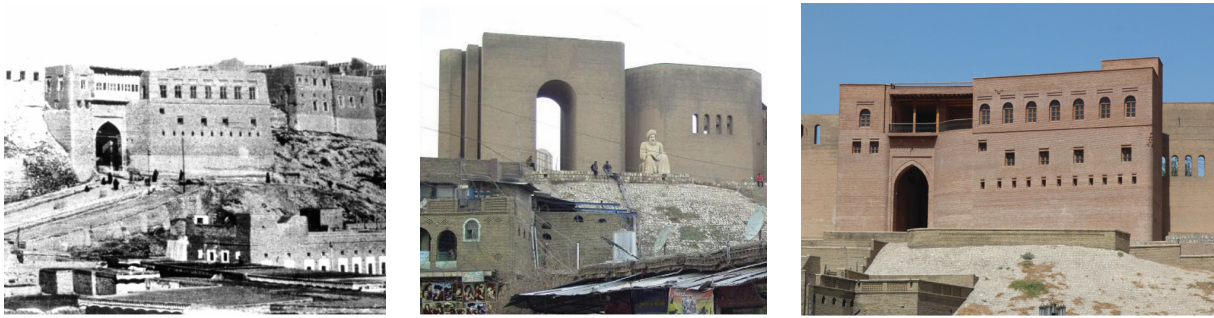


FIGURE 4 Citadel gates. (From the left) 1. The original gate, 2. The recently demolished Babylonian style replacement, 3. The redesigned gate based on the original.

From another perspective, the new autonomous government was also able to address political decisions adapted by the Baa'th party during its control over the city that affected urban form and identity. In the 1970s, the original historic gate of Erbil's Citadel was demolished and replaced with one that included architectural elements imported from Babylonian design from outside the region and was felt by many as an attempt to 'Babylonize' the Citadel (Figure 4).⁵⁰ Consequently, a decision was made by the Kurdish government to demolish the reconstructed gate and replace it with one that followed the original historic design. However, they did not consider that the 1970s Babylonian gate was a part of the Citadel's evolution process nor did they view it as a legitimate part of the city's transformed identity, highlighting the evolving nature of place identity in historic urban settings and conflict.

Furthermore, comparing the the old town's historical character and the different elements of its urban fabric with new developments, we can observe a lack of coherent rhythms and harmonious patterns of local character and consistency in the area that has resulted in a perceived visual intrusion on the historic urban fabric and the surrounding pattern. In an attempt to address this issue, the Kurdish government has started to develop a set of planning regulations and urban design guidelines for current and future developments. These guidelines and regulations aim to protect the heritage value and character of the Citadel and its surrounding historic districts by controlling and guiding development in the area. Unfortunately, despite these efforts and attempts, areas outside the citadel and the old town still lack comprehensive planning and urban design regulations as most of the planning strategies are still rooted in previous system. An interview with a senior official at the department of planning and urban design revealed that addressing place-identity as you move away from the citadel and the city centre becomes less of a priority, highlighting the lack of understanding of the need from an updated comprehensive holistic approach to planning and urban design.

To a great extent, the analysis has shown that the planning system is notably political and reflect aspirations for the global positioning of Kurdistan and Erbil as its capital. Most of the leading politicians and decision makers in the region share this vision for Erbil to be on par with places like Dubai.⁵¹ This desire to compete on a regional and global level has led to a strong drive for rapid post-conflict reconstruction as part of the recovery process. All this has resulted in a rapid urban transformation across the region and particularly in Erbil, changing the city's local place-identity through its evolving urban fabric and new developments. Two clear examples are the introduction gated 'themed' communities and contemporary developments. To highlight the spatial consequences of this post-conflict transformation on place-identity, two examples will be explored in more depth in the following sections.



FIGURE 5 The English and Italian villages, examples of high income gated communities

GATED COMMUNITIES AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

As mentioned earlier, decades of conflict and severe sanctions have resulted in limited urban development in Erbil. Additionally, the recent influx of Internally Displaced People (IDP) and refugees has led to a shortage of housing across the city and an escalation in rental prices.⁵² Consequently, housing policy and development became one of the first steps taken towards the post-conflict recovery process. The Kurdish government introduced affordable housing schemes that offered mortgage loans targeting low-income groups and has led investors to develop cost effective housing with limited consideration to socio-cultural needs and local place-identity. Moreover, the rapid economic growth also attracted both local and international investors. They developed housing projects that reflect global design ideologies to target high-income categories of society. Examples of these types of developments are the 'Italian Village' and the 'English Village' (Figure 5). Similarly, the urban fabric and design typologies used lack responsiveness to the local culture and climate and are segregated from the surrounding context as they introduce western identities that are different from the local built form and pattern of the area. Consequently, these residential developments have mostly failed to provide locals with their basic housing requirements and have led to their use by business firms and are now mostly occupied by international expatriates

Both types of housing mentioned above are considered gated developments with closed perimeter walls and strictly controlled entrances that targets a specific demographic of residents. Furthermore, most of these gated communities are composed of 100's of multiple units, are modular in type, and that lacks variety and distinctively. As a result, these housing typologies are in contrast with Erbil's residential landscape in terms of their forms and functions and have resulted in social segregation between residents of the city. Unfortunately, weaknesses in the current planning system does not regulate development or require developers to seek proper skills and awareness leading to consideration of 'place-identity' from architects and urban designers throughout the design process. Additionally, research interviews with the urban planning department in Erbil revealed that the issue of place-identity was not considered when the department designs, assesses, reviews and approves schemes and developments outside the old town. Consequently, these developments lack character, distinctiveness and connectivity to the surrounding urban fabric and speak an urban language that is in stark contrast with historical and traditional Kurdish models of inhabitation and social interaction.



FIGURE 6 Contemporary buildings reflecting global design ideologies

Additionally, during this period, the Kurdish government introduced new investment policies and incentives in order to attract and encourage foreign investors and developers to take part in the building and reconstruction process of modern Kurdistan. However, this has resulted in developments following new design ideologies that are globally influenced and architectural elements that lack consistency with culture, climate, and the existing context of the region. and reflect global influences and international architectural norms that could belong in any part of the world and are in contrast with the traditional values of the city and lack historical continuity thus ignoring the local place-identity of the area (Figure 6).

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper the consequences of planning mechanisms and strategies on the transformation of place-identity was analysed through four time periods using the city of Erbil as a case study. The discussion has shown that place-identity in the post conflict period has transformed rapidly, especially in areas outside the citadel and the old town. The two examples mentioned in the previous section were used to explain the implications of the recent urban transformation of local-place-identity in order to highlight the lack of holistic approach to urban planning and design. This transformation has negatively impacted local place-identity as many areas have lost links with their historical past and are embracing micro-identities, which are anonymous and can be found anywhere around the world. As consequence, areas have embraced a collage of multiple identities that fail to collectively represent the city's local place-identity.

Although the government encourages and provides opportunities for new modern developments as part of promoting Erbil as the capital of Kurdistan, their main focus and effort is on the citadel and the old town in terms of the conservation and enhancement of the local place-identity and not on developing a holistic comprehensive approach to urban form. Therefore, there is an urgent need for resilient planning and urban design strategies that could guide future developments to reflect and respect heritage values, tradition and culture while allowing and embracing modern values. Without a targeted strategy, place-identity is at risk of evolving in a way that threatens Kurdish values, tradition and culture and fails to adapt and respond to the rapidly changing political and economic conditions. Most importantly, cities in post-conflict context need resilient strategies that could adapt to the political and economic changes in order to guide the reconstruction process without compromising local traditions and identity.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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