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Quest for authenticity in reinvention of historic houses in urban areas

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: A relatively large number of historic (traditional and old) houses have been restored in Iranian cities in the recent period. Of increasing demand in the era of the experience economy, many are used as cafes, restaurants, galleries, ecolodges, etc. Cultural heritage and urban policies have further provided a general framework and some incentives for the restoration and reuse of these houses. Leveraging a tourism development framework, this paper investigated how authenticity could be achieved in practice in the restoration and reinvention of historic houses.

METHODS: A flexible policy research approach was employed to probe the current framework governing the restoration of historic houses. Another part of the analysis was based on a set of semi-structured interviews and field observations targeting restored historic houses in the city of Shiraz. Specifically, interviews were conducted with owners/operators of the most significant category of reused old houses—those turned into ecolodges—along with visitors.

FINDINGS: Based on the fieldwork results, five general recommendations were provided for owners/operators of restored historic houses/ecolodges toward realizing authenticity: there is a need for pre-planning and employment of adequate knowledge and knowhow to provide authentic experiences to visitors; objective elements should leverage creativity, balance tradition and modernity, and give the establishment its own personality; subjective elements should be reflective of local culture, history, and hospitality; a major aim is to have tourists emotionally engaged with the place and easily interact with people, places, and things; and allowing for co-creation could instill an enduring sense of belonging into visitors.

CONCLUSION: Notwithstanding recommendations for owners/operators of restored historic houses, tourism and urban authorities must focus on the creation of a policy framework that encourages the delivery and management of authenticity. Adopting a stronger socio-cultural approach should help to achieve additional regeneration objectives of local economic development through increased interaction among public-sector agencies, non-governmental institutions, local populations (property-owners or tenants), and investors.

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INTRODUCTION

Most historic neighborhoods in Iranian cities as well as small towns have been ravaged by the forces of rapid urban expansion and transformation over the past half a century. Despite this, many of them still have significant stocks of historic houses (loosely defined here as any traditional or old residential building of esthetic or cultural value) with attractive characteristics. These houses constitute a major part of the cultural heritage in urban areas. As such, their proper preservation would provide the current and future generations with a sense of identity and continuity, which could in turn promote respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO, 2003). A majority of historic houses remain in dilapidated and unsafe conditions. Yet, many are now being restored to be used in new ways, as they have found increasing demand in the last few years in light of their attractiveness. Public-sector policy has further come to encourage their repair and preservation in the recent period. Some of the more important historic houses have been transformed into museums. A relatively large number of less significant traditional and old houses have been repaired and turned into restaurants, cafes, galleries, special workshops, ecolodges, etc. As a manifestation of the era of the *experience economy* (Pine and Gilmore, 2011), the rise in demand for experiencing has influenced such initiatives (Li *et al.*, 2022; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020; Seyitoğlu and Ivanov, 2020). Visitors seek to experience dining or lodging in old-style houses. Rendering authenticity in these activities can arguably help to enhance the experience, as a means of both cultural heritage preservation and tourism development. This said, the level of authenticity is affected by the consumer herself as well as the provider and the experience (Le *et al.*, 2021). Leveraging a tourism development framework, this paper contributes to debates concerning the goal of restoring traditional and old houses in Iran while ensuring authenticity. It first provides a brief review of the relevant literature on cultural heritage conservation, its contribution to development goals, and the role of authenticity. The paper then highlights some of the characteristics of traditional and old houses in Iran. This is followed by a discussion of the current public-policy framework in the country for repairing and preserving old buildings and the role of authenticity in this context. The paper

further discusses the results of semi-structured interviews and field observations conducted from early 2021 to early 2022 in traditional and old houses that have been turned into ecolodges in the city of Shiraz (Fars Province, Iran). The purpose is to examine how authenticity can best be achieved in practice in the reinvention of historic houses. Five general recommendations are thus provided for owners/operators of restored historic houses/ecolodges toward rendering authenticity.

Authenticity, cultural heritage, and development

Pine and Gilmore (2011) describe a progression of economic value across five different products offered to customers: commodities, goods, services, experiences, and transformations. Progression to transformations is associated with advancing sensibilities from availability to cost and quality and then to authenticity. This suggests that today's businesses must learn to recognize, manage, and excel at delivering authenticity (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Authenticity in tourism—the values and ideas tied to everything tourists do or visit—was first conceptualized by MacCannell (1973). It quickly became the key concept in an emergent sociological paradigm for the study of tourism (Zhou *et al.*, 2022). Cohen (1979) recognizes that while the concept is flexible in the minds of tourists, any design in the tourism industry would benefit from its application. A sense of authenticity is projected by a mixture of materiality and imagination. Tourists emotionally connect with the tourism space when they sense authenticity, which is likely to provide them with enduring memories. Additionally, authenticity can lend itself to changing tourists from consumers to prosumers (Toffler, 1980; Atzeni *et al.*, 2022; Le *et al.*, 2022), producers of the experiences they wish to consume. As experienced across tourist attractions, authenticity is influenced by emotions, memories, identities, and intersubjectivities in relation to the surrounding environment. It has long been recognized as a motivating factor for tourists to consume cultural heritage (Carreira *et al.*, 2022; Genc and Genc, 2022; Zhang and Lee, 2022; Zhu *et al.*, 2022; Volo, 2021; Wood, 2020; Rickly and McCabe, 2017). No particular set of components constituting authenticity exist, since the desire for authenticity cannot be reduced to a simple checklist (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Yet, the concept of authenticity is to be

incorporated into the design of the experiences with the aim to engage emotions and create memorability. At the same time, expert design can only go so far in creating specific experiences. Tourists should be able to design the authentic experiences they desire. In this way, authenticity can be achieved through a co-creative operation (Rickly and McCabe, 2017; Dueholm and Smed, 2014). The agency associated with the role of tourists thus becomes an important contributor to the process (Javed and Awan, 2022). Cultural heritage has significant socio-economic development potentials (Ramaano, 2021). All countries have an array of cultural heritages, which can be integrated in their tourism sectors toward their local and regional development goals. Authenticity improves the performance of heritage tourism by enhancing tourists' experiences and satisfaction (Tian et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2022). This is evidenced by the abundance of advertising for products that are claimed to be authentic. Beyond claims, or even inclusion in such prestigious rosters as the World Heritage List, authenticity is usually the most attractive attribute of a cultural heritage destination or product—given people's desire for genuine experiences. More visits by tourists satisfied with their authentic experiences can arguably boost the positive feedback loop between heritage assets and socio-economic development (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021).

What is special about traditional and old houses in Iran?

Unfortunately, no nationwide data on the number of traditional and old houses—restored or unrestored—have been published in Iran. Some anecdotal information is however available. For example, according to Fars Province's Director General of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts (Amiri, 2020), 309 historical houses have undergone restoration during the last ten years. In particular, by benefiting from private sector participation, 64 historical houses were reportedly restored in the Iranian fiscal year 2020-2021 (Amiri, 2020). Similar number of cases may be assumed for some other provincial capitals/large cities. According to its latest Statistical Yearbook (MCTH, 2020), the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts entered into 644 agreements for the restoration of various urban buildings, including houses, bathhouses,

and bazars across the country in the Iranian fiscal year 2019-2020. Based on the same source, 1,315 buildings of importance were repaired, protected, or studied during the previous year. Although the available information does not distinguish between the various types of building, it is safe to assume that at least three quarters of the aforementioned number is associated with old houses. As major elements of local architecture, traditional and old houses constitute important historic assets in Iran's cities, towns, and smaller settlements. They embody a combination of art, engineering, and/or vernacular culture. Each is unique with some special identity characteristics—whether subjective or objective. Yet, they naturally represent the period in which they were built. Each house has a set of subjective or symbolic aspects in addition to its objective elements. They include those rooted in the deeper and potentially unconscious level of culture—for example, how the entrances have been designed. Exhibiting such elements, houses belonging to the pre-modern era (pre-Pahlavi or early Pahlavi) tend to invoke a sense of introspection. There are also objective elements related to the personal lives and identities of the original inhabitants of each house, including social symbols that convey specific images and messages such as social status. Some of the objective elements shared by most pre-modern Iranian houses include (Kateb, 2005):

1. Male and female door knockers (*kubeh*) (Fig. 1) and transitional spaces at the entrances (*hashti*): These elements reflect the separation of private and public lives and gender roles.
2. Central courtyard: The central courtyard connects the different parts of the house (Fig. 2)—divided into *andaruni* and *biruni* or private (women's) and public parts and often summer and winter quarters. It further creates a small "paradise" to be enjoyed by the residents away from the hassles of the outside life.
3. Small pool (*howz*): Means of storing water—especially in the semi-arid and arid areas of Iran—is an important element of the Iranian architecture (Fig. 2). Larger houses may have their own cisterns (*ab-anbar*). Yet, all houses have small pools. Located in the middle of courtyards, they guarantee the availability of water for residents and further act as a mechanism for reducing the heat in the summer months. They are often painted blue and have additional aesthetic



Fig 1: Kubeh—traditional gendered door knockers



Fig 2: Central courtyard and howz—small blue pool



Fig 3: A fountain in the middle of a howz

elements. If equipped with a fountain (Fig. 3), the small pool gives a pleasant sound which enhances the sense of calm in the house.

4. Use of light: Windows usually have stained glasses which direct light from the courthouse into the rooms in a variety of colors (Fig. 4). With some cultural significance, mirrors found in some rooms further reflect the light. They are important in Iran's

traditional architecture—making rooms appear larger, adding a sense of spirituality, and symbolizing truth, intimacy, and consciousness.

These features are common in traditional residential architecture across Iran, although houses from different eras and in different climatic conditions have distinct characteristics. Most of the extant historic houses are from the Qajar and early



Fig 4: Harmony of light and color

Pahlavi eras, although some also belong to the earlier Zand, Afshar, or Safavid periods. The Safavid era is sometimes said to have been Iran's most brilliant artistic period in the Islamic period—especially as reflected in its architecture (Canby, 2002). Safavid designs are famous for the use of light and color, large *iwans*, and distinct paintings. Malek-o-Tojjar house in Yazd (which is now a hotel) and Bekhradi House in Isfahan are two residential examples of this golden age of architecture in Iran. Residential architecture of the Zand and Afshar periods is a continuation of the Safavid style, but often exhibits more vernacular and local features. During the relatively long Qajar period, residential architecture in Iran was increasingly influenced by European styles, resulting in unique and highly eclectic designs. Use of red and yellow tiles, flower designs in wall paintings, and special windows called *orsis* are some elements specific to this era's architecture. Amir Nezam house, Qajar Museum of Tabriz, and the Manteghi-nezhad mansion in Shiraz are some of the extant examples of residential architecture from the Qajar period (Abdifar and Arefi, 2014). Iranian architecture came under the influence of nation-building and modernizing ideologies during the Pahlavi period. The use of traditional and ancient forms and motifs was encouraged alongside European neoclassical and modernist designs. This resulted in a variety of architectural outcomes—as seen in the Marble Palace, Museum of Ancient Iran, or Central Post Office in Tehran. Lalei house and Shahryar's house in Tabriz are two attractive residential examples of the Pahlavi architecture (Ghobadian, 2013). Settlement characteristics have obviously affected the architecture of old houses. Some subjective and objective elements of Iran's old houses may thus be associated with

specific settlements or neighborhoods, which have nevertheless evolved through time. Climatic conditions have been of central importance in relation to traditional architectural forms. Residents of mountainous settlements in the west and north, flat lands and deserts in other areas, and southern and northern coastal regions have had different requirements in terms of residential architecture. Windcatchers in the desert-town of Yazd and red-clay roof tiles in the Caspian region are examples of such major differences. Available building materials have further played a significant role in architecture. As every locality had distinct cultural features, each city or town was built differently and allowed for various types of interactions among people (Tahbaz and Jalilian, 2018). Traditional old houses are also rooted in the culture of their respective communities—influenced by distinct historical, geographic/climatic, and social circumstances. As elsewhere, culture, architecture, and identity were tightly connected in the communities to which the old houses belonged (Jones, 2011; Heitmann, 2011; Beverland, 2005). While authenticity should be included in any discussion on heritage conservation (Boonzaaier and Wels, 2018), it is even more crucial for the restoration of residential architecture with such social backgrounds. Next section discusses the extent to which Iranian public policies on restoration of the traditional and old houses are concerned with authenticity.

Current public-policy framework concerning traditional and old houses

Cities in Iran have experienced vast changes over the years. Many of the older neighborhoods, especially those dating from the pre-Pahlavi era, have

experienced an exodus of their original residents to newly-constructed and modern parts of the cities and their replacement by poor migrants. Alternatively, part of their housing stock has been turned into depots or workshops. These have translated into underinvestment in these neighborhoods, turning them into slums in many cases. In old neighborhoods faring better in terms of investment, most houses have been replaced by multi-story apartment buildings. The circumstances have meant a significant loss of traditional buildings and cultural heritage of the cities. These outcomes have been further associated with the contemporary urban planning and municipal management milieus, whereby commercial interests and real estate speculative activities have remained unchecked. Unfortunately, urban policies in Iran have not been able to strike the needed balance between development goals, private-sector interests, and heritage preservation objectives (Rouhani, 2011). The original legal framework for the protection of cultural heritage in Iran—Law Concerning Preservation of National Patrimony (Majles, 1930)—dates back to around 90 years ago. Additional legislation and guidelines were adopted in the ensuing decades, including a law on punishing those responsible for damaging historic buildings (Majles, 1958). In the early 1970s, Iran's accession to the Convention Concerning the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972) was officially approved by the parliament (Majles, 1974). The Cultural Heritage Organization was established in 1985 (notwithstanding its predecessor institutions). As part of its statute adopted by the Majles (1988), the coverage of the earlier legal frameworks for protection was expanded to include additional cultural patrimony. An important piece of legislation adopted by the Government Cabinet (2005) is the Guidelines for Managing, Organizing, Supervising, and Supporting Legal Owners and Operators of Movable Cultural-Historic Properties. It mandates the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts (MCTH)—previously known as Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization (CHHTO)—to provide technical as well as some financial assistance for the restoration of movable or immovable cultural heritage by private actors. Additionally, Iran's Third and Fourth National Development Plans (for the periods 2000-2004 and 2005-2009 respectively) obligated municipal administrations

and local councils to address infrastructure and service needs in historic cultural zones. The Fifth National Development Plan (for the period 2011-2015) became more specific about the conservation duties of municipal administrations in historic zones. Theoretically, when a heritage item (a traditional building) is registered with Iran National Heritage List (INHL), it can benefit from legal protection and certain public-sector support services, including financial assistance (Abbasi, 2020). In practice, MCTH and municipal administrations are likely to face significant financial and other obstacles in fulfilling such mandates. Furthermore, a large number of traditional and old houses in Iranian cities are not registered with INHL. This said, the aforementioned pieces of legislation have had the effect of providing some tax and municipal fee exemptions concerning cultural-historic properties (Mohammadi *et al.*, 2014). Of further note is that the government has become increasingly cognizant of the need for policy frameworks aimed at preserving traditional and old houses and historic neighborhoods in Iranian cities. The shift in approach—from reconstruction to restoration and regeneration—has had the aim of being more attentive to cultural identities and bottom-up approaches. The National Strategy Document on Revitalizing, Upgrading, Renovating and Enabling Deteriorated and Underutilized Urban Fabrics (Government Cabinet, 2014), prepared by the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development (MRUD) in coordination with the Interior Ministry and CHHTO defines historic neighborhoods as: "Section(s) of city reflecting cultural-historic values, formed through the interaction between human beings and their surrounding environments in the course of time and distinguished from other zones by apparent characteristics and constituent structures." Its seventh defined strategy under the title "Identifying, preserving, strengthening and leveraging the physical, social, economic and environmental capacities of historic-cultural places and areas in revitalization, rehabilitation and renovation of target urban areas and neighborhoods" stipulates the following (Government Cabinet, 2014):

1. *In each city/region's cultural or historic areas (as designated by the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization), specific guidelines for intervention (physical, economic, social, environment, etc.) and supervision will be prepared (with an*

approach entailing the protection of cultural and historic heritage and enhancement of quality of life for area residents) with the collaboration of MRUD and the respective mayoral administration based on 'approved regulations for protection of national historic fabrics'. The guidelines will be approved by the Supreme Council of Architecture and Urban Planning of Iran.

2. Combining urban design with urban revitalization in historic and cultural sites through an approach that aims to preserve their physical–environmental identities as well as their effects on other urban elements while allowing them to assume new functions;

3. Promoting tourist/historic attractions of target urban areas and neighborhoods through a socioeconomic revitalization approach as well as physical improvement of their public spaces and by attracting investment and designating appropriate land-uses in compliance with relevant guidelines and regulations;

4. Avoiding large-scale physical interventions and emphasizing the preservation of unity in the physical-structural and social systems by making use of an approach aimed at regaining community identities through shared social memories, maintaining and optimizing population densities, and protecting neighborhood centers with the participation of residents in target urban areas and neighborhoods;

5. Revitalizing historic-cultural sites in target urban areas and neighborhoods through redefining their roles and functions and by taking into consideration urban economic needs;

6. Planning for the conservation and revitalization of historic landmarks—individual, complex, area or site—located in target urban zones, as well as elements directly related to them, with a focus on integrating their economic structures with those of their respective cities.

The above can be taken to allude to authenticity, although the term is not explicitly mentioned in the document. In the same vein, MCTH has striven to give increasing attention to local scales, cultural diversity, and the interaction between people and the built environment in its approach to the restoration of traditional and old houses. The aim has been to protect cultural heritage in the cities from the forces of rapid change—which is not an easy task. The Law on Supporting Restoration and Revitalization of Historic-

Cultural Fabrics passed by the parliament (Majles, 2019) gives a central role in its stipulated activities to MCTH, which is mandated to work closely with MRUD and the Interior Ministry as well as several other government ministries and public-sector agencies. The aforementioned law calls on MCTH and other agencies to prepare specific guidelines, budgets, and programs for its various stipulations—which remain forthcoming. It defines restoration and revitalization as (Majles, 2019):

1. Restoration (maremmat): Specialized and comprehensive (quantitative and qualitative) operations that aim to protect, express, and unveil historic, cultural and aesthetic values of an artefact, by taking into account its authenticity and integrity, and that include various phases, from preservation, stabilization, and consolidation to restoration of its condition to an authentic and sustainable state

2. Revitalization (ehya): A purposive process comprising a set of actions carried out with the intention of preservation and quality enhancement in historic-cultural fabrics while protecting authenticity and integrity.

The existing guidelines suggest that restoration and revitalization should be carried out within legally-specified frameworks to create new functions in traditional and old houses and to recycle underutilized urban real estate. These houses can thus be leveraged effectively in the urban development process while they are being respected and preserved. With legislative support, restoration of the traditional and old houses is supposed to accelerate the city's development through empowering local communities in economic, social, and cultural terms. Each restoration project should strive to maintain the traditional façade of the structure. A main purpose would be to promote cultural tourism in accordance with the existing heritage assets. Infrastructure and services are to be upgraded to become compatible with the new functions and the needs of local residents. Furthermore, a significant role is supposed to be given to the private sector and NGOs in carrying out all these activities. Despite the existence of this policy milieu, it is hardly clear how authenticity is supposed to be achieved in the activities.

Contemporary reinventions of old houses and question of authenticity

Encouraged by the recent heritage conservation policy framework and a growing demand for new types of experiences, a relatively large number of interested people have embarked on investing in traditional and old houses across Iranian cities. Restoration and revitalization of these houses have relied on different approaches, aiming to reap economic and/or cultural rewards. Many of the restored houses have been turned into cafes, galleries, boutique hotels, or tourism lodges. These establishments are likely to organize such events as exhibitions, workshops or tours, introduce local traditions and handicrafts to visitors, or serve traditional cuisines. Starting up small businesses in the restored old houses is thought to have a set of direct and indirect economic benefits for the local neighborhoods—especially through tourism development and the expansion of entrepreneurial activities and employment. They appear to have attracted visitors to the neglected parts of the cities. When social, cultural, and economic aspects of the houses and their neighborhoods are incorporated in these activities, restorations can be more appropriately called reinventions. Yet, lack of sustainable outlooks can lead to the “dialectics of disappearance” (Gilloch and Kilby, 2005). Many of the old houses reinvented as restaurants or cafes in Iranian cities have disappeared after a few years. With respect to cultural heritage, reinvention is about utilizing the past according to the needs of the contemporary society (Nilson and Thorell, 2018). Given the embeddedness of many of the traditional and old houses in their respective communities, the local impact of their reinvention should be considered carefully. Furthermore, since the number of such houses may be large in some neighborhoods, a careful approach is needed that takes into account various economic, social, and architectural aspects of the reinventions collectively. In the rest of this paper, an attempt is made to tease out the outlines of such steps to be taken in connection with the reinvention of old houses to achieve some level of authenticity. The study focuses on those old houses that have been turned into ecolodges (*eqamatgah-e bumgardī*)—since they appear to be the most significant outcomes of the reinventions. Iranian ecolodges have received increasing attention in the literature in the recent period. For example, Varmazyari *et al.* (2022) have focused on the entrepreneurship aspects of establishing an ecolodge in an emerging market.

Irani *et al.* (2022) have examined the main problems and challenges faced by ecolodges in three northern Iranian provinces to especially highlight inadequate public-sector support and a deficient regulatory milieu. Salari and Murphy (2022) have looked at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the fate of ecolodges in Iran, while Chogan (2021) has probed the motivation and satisfaction of ecolodge patrons in the country’s desert areas. Most earlier studies on Iranian ecolodges have similarly focused on rural, nomadic, and desert areas (Alaedini and Aminzadeh, 2014). Yet, the issue of authenticity in old houses in urban settings reinvented as ecolodges has received little attention in empirical tourism research. To fill part of the void here, results of field observations and a set of interviews carried out from early 2021 to early 2022 in the city of Shiraz are leveraged. The objective is to investigate how authenticity can be achieved in the practice of reinventing historic houses as ecolodges.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Being among the most important tourist destinations in Iran, the city of Shiraz was chosen for the field study (Fig. 5). Significant prior familiarity of the authors with the city also influenced the decision on this selection. Shiraz boasts a relatively large number of historic houses, 85 of which are registered with MCTH as belonging to the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. They are mostly located in the city’s historic zone—in particular, in Sang-e Syah, Darb-e Shazdeh, and Astaneh neighborhoods (Fig. 5d)—which were targeted in this study. Field research was carried out from early 2021 to early 2022 and focused on ecolodges as the most significant outcomes of reinvention activities. The goal was to incorporate the local voices. According to MCTH (2020), 33 ecolodges operated in the city in 2019-2020. All these ecolodges except one (which was temporarily closed) were targeted. Field observations were thus carried out in 32 ecolodges. Network sampling and convenience sampling were employed respectively to interview 18 owners/managers of the establishments and 14 persons among their guests. Thus, rather than being representative, the study’s sample was diversive as is often the aim in qualitative research. In qualitative studies with small amount of data, subjective interpretations and processes are further expected (Deterding and Waters, 2021; Pratt *et al.*, 2020).

Saturation, operationalized in relation to the analytic framework and research questions, were used as the criterion to finalize data collection (Saunders et al., 2018). Reliability and validity of the results were enhanced by having three experts scrutinize the gathered information and their subsequent coding. Tables 1 and 2 provide basic information about the interviewees.

Formulated based on Pine and Gilmore (2011) and prior local familiarity with Shiraz and its old houses and ecolodges, the original interview questions included the following: In the restoration of old houses, how much effort was put into reproducing things from the past? How much effort was put into making reference to symbols, ideas, people, or events associated with the area, era, and/or the city? How do the services

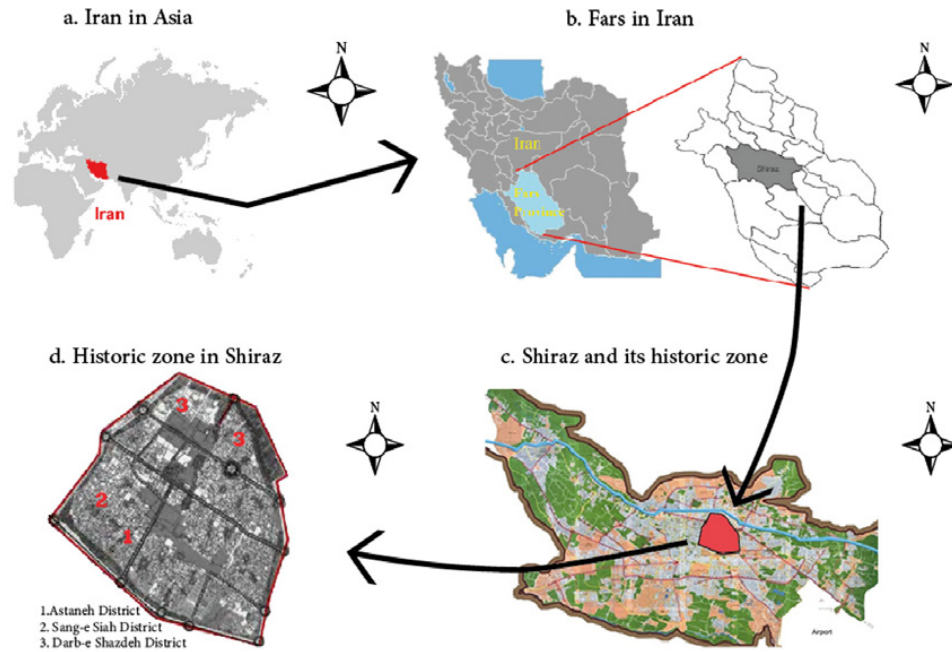


Fig. 5: Geographic Location of the study area in Shiraz, Iran (Derakhshan et al., 2018; Map Pictures, 2022; Ahmadi and Zarghami, 2019; Farahani et al., 2015)

Table 1: Interviewed tourists

Interviewee	City of residence	Occupation
# 1	Rasht	Industrial designer
# 2	Tehran	Graphic designer
# 3	Tehran	Photographer and nature tour guide
# 4	Tehran	Tourism agency marketing manager
# 5	Esfahan	College student
# 6	Tehran	Wildlife specialist
# 7	Yazd	Housewife
# 8	Sâri	Marketing agent
# 9	Tehran	Architect
# 10	Mashhad	Blue-collar employee
# 11	Tehran	Entrepreneurship manager
# 12	Esfahan	Researcher and Ph.D. candidate
# 13	Tehran	Blue-collar employee; Instagram influencer
# 14	Gorgan	Involved in ecotourism; music instructor

Table 2: Interviewed ecolodge owners/operators

Interviewee	Former occupation	Years active in ecolodge business
# 1	Shopkeeper	2 Years
# 2	Tour guide	8 Years
# 3	Tourism student; tourism industry employee	3 Years
# 4	Artist and professor	5 Years
# 5	Owner of tourism establishment; involved in restoration of old houses	11 Years
# 6	Shopping center manager	3 Years
# 7	Involved in home construction	2 Years
# 8	Involved in tourism industry	5 Years
# 9	Involved in food industry	4 Years
# 10	Involved in tourism industry	6 Years
# 11	Involved in hotel and hospitality industry	10 Years
# 12	Accountant	5 Years
# 13	Involved in handicrafts industry	8 Years
# 14	No work experience; recent tourism graduate	4 Years
# 15	Blue-collar employee	4 Years
# 16	Worked in tourism industry	7 Years
# 17	Housewife	3 Years
# 18	Owner of children's education institute	3 Years

and characteristics offered through the old-houses-turned-into-ecolodges match local culture? Have various groups and their needs been considered in the service offerings of the ecolodges? With respect to hospitality strategies, how do owners/operators of the ecolodges receive feedback from visitors and how do visitors provide suggestions to owners/operators? What are the potential social and cultural impacts on visitors of the reinvented old houses?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Toward achieving authenticity in reinvention of old houses

Findings from the interviews and field observations are discussed in this subsection. To begin with, running a restored old house/ecolodge in a proper manner requires adequate knowledge and a strong focus on carefully-formulated goals. There is often a need to make use of expert knowledge and knowhow. The employed knowledge and knowhow should lead to the creation of an identity for the restored old house and in turn to an effective brand advertisement. One of the interviewees—who had turned his ancestral home into an ecolodge and was a member of the Board of the Directors of Fars Province Ecolodge Association—provided the following comment of interest on the pricing schedule:

Due to my insistence, we added something new [to the pricing schedule] based on identity and personality of the building. We gave it two dimensions.

One was based on the facade of the building, which should follow native architecture. This is irrespective of the interior...only pertaining to the appearance. And the second dimension we considered was to ask whether this ecolodge adds something to the market? Therefore, we came to define an advantage for an ecolodge—called the identity of the restored house.

Yet, an ecolodge does not only consist of objective material elements. There is a need for the incorporation of subjective elements in the restoration of the old houses. The (re-) creation of subjective elements requires thinking beyond commercial intentions to become creative toward fashioning something that is not ordinary. Furthermore, given the cultural-historic dimensions of the old houses on one hand and the requirements of the contemporary life on the other, there is a need to simultaneously consider the traditional and modern aspects of reinvention activities in order to deliver high levels of value and meaning. The owners/operators of the restored old houses can incorporate a certain type of entrepreneurship in their reinventions to achieve this. For example, ecolodges operated by family members are likely to provide an added sense of authenticity. According to the owner of one such ecolodge:

The difference between my ecolodge and others, of which we have eight in this alley, is that we are a family-operated business. I have created employment here for my children. I am a widow who lost my husband eight years ago. I was in need of assistance.

But I have now reached a point where I am making a contribution. Why? Because I have included my children in this activity; they are employees or entrepreneurs themselves.

It is important for the owners/operators of the old houses to create the objective and subjective elements of their ecolodge businesses by incorporating the local context. This can particularly include references made to local histories, ideas, personalities, and cultural characteristics. Beyond this, connecting and contributing to the local community should be taken seriously. Yet, this should not be equated to traditionalism, which tends to be overexaggerated. This issue was highlighted by one of the interviewed tourists in the following manner:

Authenticity is not necessarily the same as tradition; not every kind of tradition should be taken as a reference and also incorporating tradition should not be at the cost of using irrelevant elements in the ecolodge; it has now become fashionable to incorporate adobe, feature some Qashqai rug or kilim, thinking that these make it traditional. Things from the locality should be used. That is, things that don't repulse and are from the architecture of the same place.

Responsibilities of an owner/operator are not only limited to restoring the old house and starting the business. After opening the establishment, the owner/operator comes into direct contact with guests. An ecolodge's guests require interaction, to which the owner/operation should respond in a planned manner. The ecolodges are supposed to embody cultural and social elements, much of which are communicated to tourists only via actual interactions. The aim should thus be to emotionally engage the ecolodge guests with the offered services and products. According to one of the interviewees (a female owner of an ecolodge for five years with prior activities in the tourism industry), this emotional engagement can benefit visitors, owners/operators, and local communities simultaneously:

Our aim was to create amity and sincerity here that are readily felt by the guests. This would provide our guests with a good time; they would respect us since they would think of us as one of themselves. And then, beyond the ecolodge, there would be no issue with respect to the community either. [A visitor] would think she has come to a place that belongs to her as well. She would take notice of the old fabric [of

the neighborhood], the elderly man who is passing by, and the elderly woman who is selling handicrafts in one corner...because a sense of belonging has been instilled into her.

Another issue is the impact of the regulatory context. Traditional and native ecolodges are not well defined in current regulations and create confusion among owners/operators of the ecolodges about what they can achieve in their reinvented old houses. Field observations in the old neighborhoods of Shiraz revealed that very similar-looking ecolodges are designated differently. For example, one may be called a traditional ecolodge and another a boutique hotel. One of the interviewees (a female owner of an ecolodge for eight years with prior experience in handicrafts) explained the situation in this way:

In my opinion, our problem in Iran is that there is no specific definition for ecolodges. That is, we should come up with some classification. For example, you would see in one country something called home stay whose difference with ecolodge, guest house, and traditional house is known and understood in terms of characteristics. But, in Iran, all of them are classified as ecotourism lodging establishments...

Lack of coordination among responsible public-sector agencies, investors, and other stakeholders was another issue raised by the interviewees. According to one of them:

We have a series of regulatory issues. The health agency has one opinion while the fire department has its own standards. The health agency's standards say that the kitchen should be of a certain size and height, however you want to achieve this. This overlooks the fact that in an old house you may not be able to do all of these. Regulations should be devised in accord with our circumstances. Every old house has a different shape. All of the responsible agencies are this way in having just a ruler in their hands. They don't care if the old house being restored is in the old city fabric or a regular street...in Iran, we destroy the old city fabrics because fire engines cannot enter them...

There are other binding regulations that ecolodges find difficult to satisfy. One important example is the ecolodge responsibility for the health of visitors, which requires insurance and several licenses. Many such regulations have severe consequences for women. According to one female ecolodge owner:

The ownership of the ecolodge my husband and I run is registered under my name. One time, when

we were desperate for financial credit, I went to a bank to get a special loan defined for ecolodges. I looked forward to receiving this loan to address my problems. But the bank refused to give me the loan. They said, the ecolodge is under your name, but we only recognize male household guardians. That means, while both of us are working hard in this business, my participation is not counted for anything as a woman. This is only one example of the issues faced by women in this business.

Furthermore, activities should focus on the enrichment of sociocultural and aesthetic values associated with the neighborhood. That is, increasing attention should be given to culture, tradition, and sustainability. Additionally, reinvention processes should be informed by potential tourist motivations for visiting the traditional and old houses. Would visitors be motivated by the desire for authentic experiences? What are their perceptions about authenticity? Would potential tourist motivations lend themselves to the sustainable operation of a large number of reinvented houses? Some owners/operators of the reinvented houses should expect long-term interactions with visitors. They must then strive for extensive social and cultural contacts between visitors and the locals. This means they should have long-term plans for these interactions.

A major means of providing more authentic experiences in reinventions is to facilitate co-creation—that is, involving other stakeholders to address the subjectivity of rendering authenticity. In particular, reinventing traditional and old houses can assume a more natural context, if owners/operators incorporate tourist contributions in the

process. In this vein, visitors become a part of the process of rendering authenticity—in contrast to being passive observers. Owners/operators of the houses and visitors can thus share contributions in the reinvention processes.

A set of five recommendations may thus be offered for owners/managers of old houses to be reinvented as ecolodges. These are provided in Table 3.

The recommendations (Table 3) corroborate some important observations stated in the literature. To begin with, according to Pine and Gilmore (2008), if one disregards the sensationally-staged experiences sometimes offered by businesses, visit decisions are increasingly made based on perceptions about genuineness—as a consumer sensibility. Volo (2021) has observed that while tourists seek to arouse their emotions, this is hardly achieved through purchasing commodities. Wood (2020) has proposed that the authenticity construct should be viewed primarily through a combination of object-based and constructivist/existentialist authenticities, further acknowledging the effect of personal experiences and changing situations. Dueholm and Smed (2014) have observed that multiple conceptions of authenticity coexist within any heritage setting—whose meanings should be recognized and understood from the point of view of the place and various groups of people. Beverland (2005) has suggested that in striving to achieve authenticity through referencing, one should focus on either the place and its history and culture or else to something more attractive beyond commercial considerations. Finally, Heitmann (2011) has added that reference may be made to intangibles such as language, rituals, or festivals.

Table 3: Recommendations for owners/operators of reinvented houses/ecolodges

Step	Recommendation
# 1	Owners/managers should think ahead and pre-plan for how they want to provide authentic experiences to visitors. They should employ adequate knowledge or knowhow. Before taking any action, they ought to choose their intended target groups and understand the characteristics of both the local community and the potential visitors.
# 2	After initiating the reinvention, owners/managers must think of how to make the house more authentic by including objective elements. These elements should leverage creativity and give the establishment its own personality. They should appear natural in balancing modernity and tradition and go beyond commercial considerations.
# 3	Application of subjective elements also helps render authenticity in reinventions. Such elements should reflect history and local traditions and culture. They should use technology appropriately.
# 4	Owners/managers should make sure that tourists can emotionally engaged with the place and can easily interact with people, places, and things. Offering local hospitality, for example through family members, can convey to visitors a sense of authenticity.
# 5	A major goal should be to have visitors undergo some enduring transformation by giving them a new awareness and securing their loyalty. Allowing for co-creation can instill a sense of belonging into the visitors. In this way, traditional and old houses can become platforms for engaging tourists in their reinvention processes.

CONCLUSION

In the context of the emergent sociological paradigm for the study of tourism, this paper treated the issue of authenticity in the restoration of historic Iranian houses. Authenticity has to do with the experiential values that tourists associate with the historic houses, which in turn motivates their visits. It is supposed to act as a mediator for transferring value to visitors. Tourists emotionally connect with the reinvented houses when they sense authenticity. While customers desire low costs for high quality products—i.e., value for their money—they also want to experience the houses in authentic ways. The study first discussed the policy framework governing the restoration of historic houses in Iran as well as the common forms of reinvention carried out in the recent period. It then leveraged the results of fieldwork targeting restored historic houses turned into ecolodges in Shiraz to offer five sets of recommendations for owners/operators of such establishments: There is a need for pre-planning and employment of adequate knowledge and knowhow to provide authentic experiences to visitors; objective elements should leverage creativity, balance tradition and modernity, and give the establishment its own personality; subjective elements should be reflective of local culture, history, and hospitality; a major aim is to have tourists emotionally engaged with the place and easily interact with people, places, and things; and allowing for co-creation could instill an enduring sense of belonging into visitors. Beyond these recommendations, tourism and urban authorities need to focus on the creation of policy frameworks that encourage the delivery and management of authenticity. In Iran, reinvention of historic houses is governed by a set of regeneration policies and restoration regulations that incorporate the goal of authenticity. In practice, however, the existing framework is faced with a number of challenges. In particular, it lacks details on ensuring an acceptable degree of authenticity. The same goes for the goal of participation. There is a need for an enhanced framework concerning the reinvention of Iran's historic houses. Among other things, the new framework should also allow for co-creation to address the subjectivity of rendering authenticity. The adoption of a stronger socio-cultural approach

should help to achieve additional regeneration objectives of local economic development and poverty alleviation through increased interaction among public-sector agencies, non-governmental institutions, local populations (property-owners or tenants), and investors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

R. Shahvali's contribution included field research and preparation of the tourism literature review on authenticity. P. Alaedini provided supervision, wrote the policy sections, and prepared the final manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. In addition, the ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication or falsification, double publication or submission, and redundancy have been completely witnessed by the authors.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CHHTO	Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization
INHL	Iran National Heritage List
MCTH	Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts
MRUD	Ministry of Roads and Urban Development

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