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From Global Knowledge to Indigenous Concerns: A Critique of Urban Planning Education in Iran

Azin Alipour Tabrizi

Ph.D. Candidate of Urban Planning
Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

Living in high-quality cities depends on educating efficient urban planners. Efficiency, in this context, refers to those influential actors in the fields of theory and practice who, while benefiting from up-to-date knowledge, are concerned about and contribute to the local context. Since educating efficient urban planners passes through the current urban planning education in the country, this paper analyzes this issue in the Iranian local context. Since the introduction of urban planning as a discipline in Iran, educational institutions have focused on training specialists based on global scientific (value-free) principles. On the one hand, global trends of accumulating science and public policy increasingly emphasize local capacities; on the other hand, Iran's comprehensive scientific map also highlights the indigenous development of the arts and humanities while adapting disciplines to real national needs. This paper demonstrates that Iran's urban planning education, to be context-efficient, should initially focus on equipping itself with comprehensive global urban planning knowledge to articulate and produce scientific outputs. Simultaneously, education in this field must acquire a proper understanding of the local context (needs, opportunities, and constraints) and address the design of contents and procedures that are relevant and responsive by precisely identifying local problems and needs. The ultimate goal is to establish and consolidate indigenous and up-to-date knowledge, skills, and insights continuously evaluated through a defined process.

Keywords: Urban planning; Urban planning education; Efficiency; Pathology.

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Email : azinealipour@gmail.com

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Why is urban planning education in Iran described as inefficient?

Extended Abstract

Urban planning plays a critical role in shaping cities and improving citizens' quality of life, while urban planning education forms the foundation for producing competent professionals capable of responding to contextual challenges. In Iran, more than six decades of experience in urban planning education reveal a need for systematic evaluation of its effectiveness, especially regarding its responsiveness to local needs. This study critically reviews the historical development, structural reforms, and prevailing challenges in Iran's urban planning education, drawing on expert perspectives, conference discussions, and scholarly publications. The discipline entered Iran in the 1960s through graduate programs modeled on French, Italian, and American systems. Post–Cultural Revolution reforms (1980–1983) and later program expansions—including undergraduate courses in 1999 and multiple curriculum revisions from 2001 onwards—have sought to address evolving urban issues. However, findings highlight persistent weaknesses: a widening gap between theory and practice, mass production of graduates without adequate competencies, superficial curriculum changes, and insufficient incorporation of indigenous knowledge and local realities. Expert critiques, notably from the First Iranian Urban Planning Education Conference (2015), emphasize the failure to align curricula with socio-cultural, historical, and environmental contexts. Although global best practices provide valuable frameworks, literature indicates that direct transfer of foreign educational models without adaptation to local planning culture is ineffective. The lack of a coherent national mechanism for continuous evaluation, coupled with the absence of a clear framework to integrate global paradigms with local needs, exacerbates these shortcomings. The analysis reveals three essential capacities for graduates: mastery of global knowledge; contextual awareness of needs, resources, and constraints; and the ability to devise and evaluate optimal, context-sensitive solutions. Current programs largely neglect the "why" questions underlying planning decisions, with research outputs dominated by descriptive or imitative approaches and evaluations often left to administrative discretion.

This study concludes that effective urban planning education in Iran requires a paradigm shift toward a locally grounded

The vacant space of "Urban Planning Education Responsive to Local Needs," equipped to empower graduates with knowledge that aligns urban interventions with the Iranian indigenous context, is perceived as a solution to the deadlock in Iran's urban planning education.

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