SDG Champions 2024

Tehran

A space for Connecting Overlooked Thoughts

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- DURATION

  Completed

- POPULATION 2024

  Tehran: **9,616,000** (Growth rate 1.22%)

- URA SCOPE

  SOCIETY. Staying Human
  ECONOMY. Urban Prosperity Beyond GDP

- TOPICS

  URBAN REVITALIZATION,
  HERITAGE RECONSTRUCTIONS,
  CULTURE & ARTS,
  PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

- MAIN ACTORS

  11th Region Tehran Municipality

Once a lively cultural heart of Tehran, the Rudaki Historical-Cultural Zone had fallen into disrepair, its architectural gems fading under the weight of neglect, unregulated expansion, and inadequate infrastructure.

Efforts to modernize risked erasing its rich heritage, while gentrification threatened to displace the very communities that had long infused the area with life. Bureaucratic red tape and funding shortages further hampered regeneration, making sustainable development a daunting challenge.

The challenges were manifold. Striking a delicate balance between preservation and modernization required careful investment in historic buildings while incentivizing private-sector involvement.

The project's solution was revolutionary: a bottom-up governance approach that entrusted urban management to the people. The initiative created a flexible, low-cost model for preserving cultural zones, one that could be replicated across Tehran and beyond. The private sector stepped in, funding restoration efforts in exchange for tax breaks, loans, and municipal support. Meanwhile, a novel urban design strategy promoted micro-cultures and self-organized businesses, officially recognizing street vendors, musicians, and small entrepreneurs for the first time in Iran's history.

Artists and cultural figures breathed new life into the district, hosting free performances in public squares, inviting people to reclaim the streets as communal spaces of artistic expression.

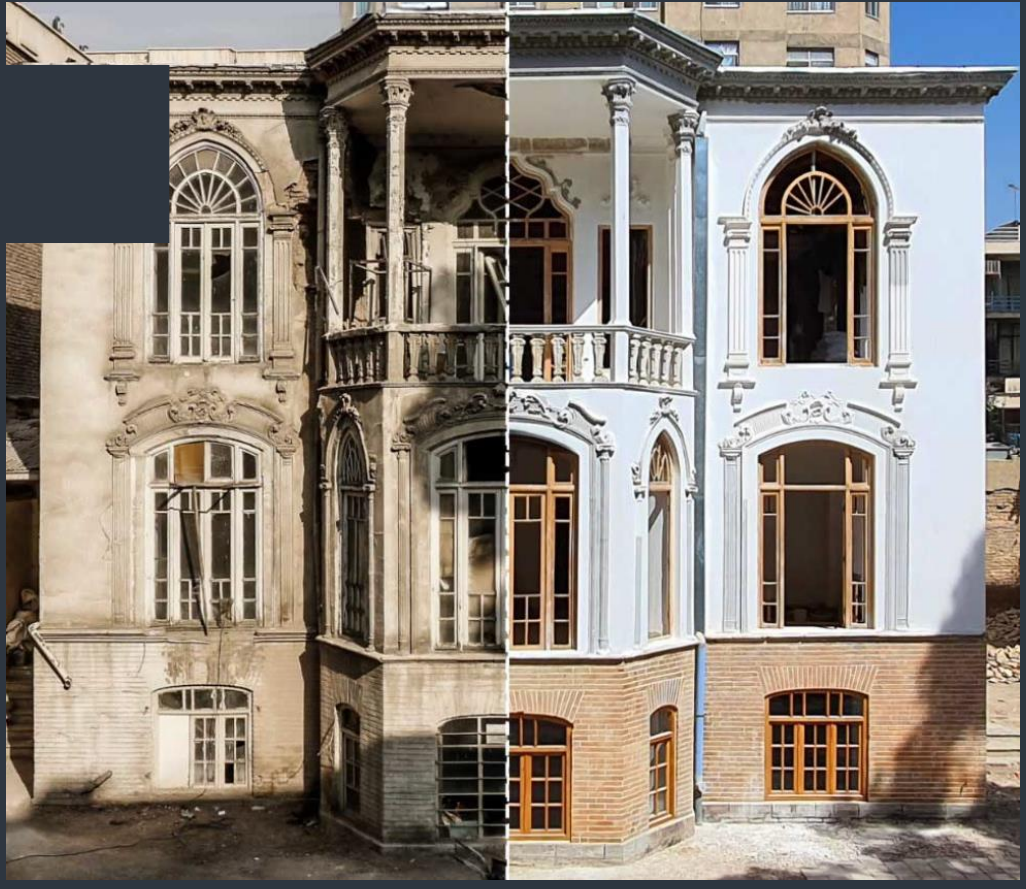
By waiving all regulatory fees for cultural and artistic endeavours, Tehran Municipality successfully attracted investment while keeping the area accessible to a diverse demographic.

Within a short period, over 40 art-themed cafés, eight theatres, four boutique hotels, and numerous private galleries and cultural shops emerged—all housed in buildings of architectural significance.

Beyond economic revitalization, the project reshaped the social fabric of Tehran. Abandoned parks were restored and made inclusive, traffic-calming measures created safer streets for children, and affordable public transport connected all social classes to the district's cultural offerings.

This once-fading historical zone now stands as a testament to the power of collective action—where art, heritage, and urban life converge to create a dynamic, inclusive future for Tehran.

TheBay Urban Visioning Awards



Challenge

The urban revitalization of Tehran's Rudaki Historical-Cultural Zone faces remarkable challenges. One major obstacle is balancing the preservation of architectural heritage with the pressures of modernization and urban expansion. Many historical buildings are at risk due to neglect or demolition, requiring significant investment and careful restoration. However, financial constraints make long-term sustainability difficult. Bureaucratic hurdles and fragmented urban governance further complicate the process, slowing decision-making and limiting the coordination needed for an integrated regeneration strategy.

Another key challenge is the risk of gentrification, which can displace long-standing communities and make the area less accessible to low-income residents. Ensuring that revitalization remains inclusive requires deliberate efforts to protect affordable spaces and promote small-scale economic opportunities.

Gender and social inequalities also pose challenges, as historically, urban spaces in Tehran have not been equally accessible to all. Ensuring that the revitalization of the Rudaki Zone creates safe, inclusive environments for women, marginalized groups, and people with disabilities requires proactive planning. Finally, securing long-term commitment from both public institutions and private investors is critical to maintaining the project's success beyond its initial implementation.

Solution Proposed

The program aims to shift urban governance toward a bottom-up approach, giving local people control over city spaces, fostering a low-cost, flexible strategy to protect Tehran's historical and cultural zones.

This innovative approach also involves using the performing arts and music as economic drivers to preserve heritage, attracting private investment for conservation. For the first time in Iran, micro-cultures, informal economies, and street vending were officially recognized. The public-private collaboration involved the municipality offering financial incentives, such as loans for building restoration and fee exemptions, while the private sector helped fund cultural initiatives.

The project also revitalized public spaces with improvements to parks, lighting, and urban furniture, creating a vibrant, gender-inclusive environment. Art and cultural activities, including free performances, were organized to encourage public engagement.

The program aligns with sustainable development goals (SDGs), promoting gender equality, reducing poverty, and ensuring inclusive access to cultural and green spaces. It also fosters economic growth by creating small-scale jobs, such as street music and art cafés, and strengthens social capital by encouraging public participation in the city's cultural life.

Impact

The plan sparked a transformation in Tehran's Rudaki area, leading to the opening of over 40 cafés infused with theatrical and musical elements, 8 theatres, 4 hotels and boutique accommodations, several private art galleries, and 10 cultural stores—all housed in buildings with architectural significance. The project's essence was built on the concept of "acupuncture urban design," strategically placing development efforts in key spots to catalyse growth. By 2030, the ripple effect of Rudaki's revitalization is expected to extend within a 1-kilometer radius, with over 1,000 new cafés and cultural centres flourishing.

The project prioritized accessibility, regenerating abandoned parks and ensuring safe, inclusive spaces for all—regardless of age, gender, or ability. It created safe, diverse leisure spaces, improved public transport, and offered free artistic performances, particularly from underprivileged artists. Through economic incentives, 14 architecturally valuable buildings were restored and repurposed into cafes, restaurants, showrooms, and boutique hotels, preserving Tehran's heritage while breathing new life into historical and contemporary structures.

This initiative didn't just restore buildings—it rejuvenated the community, fostering social capital, public participation, and a collective identity. Local inhabitants, artists, and private investors worked alongside the government, creating a cohesive space management approach.

This effort established a small-scale, self-sustaining art economy that offered employment to low-income groups, and championed social and gender equality, turning Rudaki into a thriving cultural hub that truly belonged to everyone.