

Original Research Article

# Neighborhood Secure Focal Point

## A Strategic Method for Elimination of the Renovation Stagnation

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**Abstract** | The occurrence of any earthquakes, small or large, in the country may draw the attention of authorities to the extent of Tehran's vulnerability for a while. More than three million people living in Tehran suffer from unstable housing. On the one side, Tehran is located between three active faults that earthquakes on a high Mercalli intensity scale would seriously threaten the shelters and lives of citizens. The crisis caused by high population density and poor crisis management may lead to a severe catastrophe. On the other side, based on Iran's Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture definition of urban deteriorated areas characterized by fineness modulus, instability, and impermeability, about 80% of unstable zones (areas) have been ignored. Furthermore, in such areas the peoples' lives have been threatened severely living less chance for life-saving plans. However, regarding the priority of the peoples' "life" issue, rescuing peoples' life should not be ignored for the sake of other design attributes. Therefore, the municipality and central government must seek a realistic solution to rescue residents of urban deteriorate areas in Tehran. The present study introduces the concept of "neighborhood secure focal point" as activation for renovating urban deteriorated areas and focuses on removing initial obstacles to modernization (the need to provide parking), and the emergency of incentives management (granting density, increased building area, and downsizing) as the major drivers. This study argues that any intervention for urban deteriorated areas renovation should offer improved quality of social life, developed participation, and a prosperous urban economy by tracing urban management solutions, in addition to taking account of economic benefits for owners.

**Keywords** | *Urban deteriorated areas, Participatory planning in the renovation, Earthquake, Rescue, Neighborhood secure focal point, Renovation implementation.*

**Introduction** | The issue of urban deteriorated areas in Tehran has been long interested in management and academic communities. Hence, anticipating acute conditions of urban deteriorated areas following impending crises like earthquakes considering the geotechnical condition of Tehran along with the poor quality of residents, as well as economic and social crises are the difficulties of these areas. However, it seems that stakeholders have recently deviated from the importance of this issue such that they have wrongly prioritized other issues. Considering the necessity of peoples' life rescue, promoting urban safety, and urban deteriorated areas renovation based on participatory planning, proposing

ideas for creating a safe, stable, supportive, accelerating structure for the renovation of deteriorated areas should be taken into account. This can create a foundation to meet the neighborhood requirements, parking removing in new buildings in a normal situation and for temporary shelter, providing a food supply for a limited time with high accessibility on a local scale as a solution for crisis times.

### Problem statement

About half of 615 Km<sup>2</sup> of service area in Tehran is considered as residential areas (30,000 hectares). Department of Housing and Urban Development officially reported that over 14,700 hectares are considered unstable areas (Ministry of Roads & Urban Development Portal, 2018b). The unstable texture includes city blocks

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containing at least 50% of non-resistant buildings (Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture, 2006) where houses lack concrete or steel structures that have no dynamic resistance to the earthquake. According to the higher population density in urban deteriorated areas than the city average, and referring to the approximate statistics of residing at least 37% of 8.9 million people (Statistical Yearbook, 2018) in unstable textures (Ministry of Roads & Urban Development Portal, 2018a), it can be concluded that undoubtedly more than three million citizens of Tehran are now living in unstable houses.

According to Akashe, since Tehran has been located among three active faults Mousa, North, and Rey Faults with an earthquake magnitude of larger than 7 Richter (ISNA, 2016), National Cartographic Center of Iran analysis after the last earthquake in April and May 2020 demonstrated that the activated Mousa Fault has a history of occurrence of three 5-7 Richter earthquakes in Tehran (Nankali, 2020). Such an earthquake would undoubtedly result in the greatest tragedy during history, more serious than historic volcanoes, world wars, and epidemic diseases. JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) initially published scientific estimates of earthquake casualties in Tehran earthquake microzonation (JICA, 2000). Later, national organizations like Crisis Management Center and Earthquake Research Institute also published some reports raising previous numbers. Thus, according to Najari, the head of the Emergency Management Agency, it is inferred that if a 7 Richter earthquake takes place in Tehran, certainly two million people will be (directly) influenced negatively (Hamshahri Online, 2020).

Iran's Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture, in 2005, characterized urban deteriorated areas with three elements of fineness modulus (blocks that over 51% are less than 211 m<sup>2</sup> in area), instability (blocks where more than 51% of buildings are unstable lacking structural system), and impermeability (blocks with over 51% of passages being less than 6 meters wide) as the criteria of urban deteriorated areas (Haeri, 2007, 10). In practice, the issue of the danger of life in unstable houses was categorized under qualitative utilities, which has deviated rescue measures toward propaganda. On the other side, although the 10-year renovation plan has been approved by urban management, Urban Development, and Renovation Company in 2006, and the quick action areas have been identified by the aforementioned criteria from four years ago, up to 45% of urban deteriorated areas qualifying the three requirements of Tehran as a leading city in the process of renovation have been removed from building deterioration process (Tasnim News Agency, 2020). Around 60% of confirmed textures and 90% of unstable urban textures have remained intact in Tehran

and other cities. Economic and political conditions, and extensive sanctions, would not depict a macro revenue perspective for the government in the short-term. At the same time, the risk of earthquakes and the death of several million residents in Tehran is increasing. In areas where the issue of "life" matters within the process of urban deteriorated areas renovation, no authorities are authorized to prioritize any other measures to the rescue operation. The rescue must be the primary goal and the main strategy of any renewal interventions in cities based on which national renovation organizations are planned and restored so that any duties but rescue would be detached from the renovation organization (Mansouri, 2020). Thus, the municipality in the first place and the central government in the second are obliged to suggest some short-term achievable solution to save residents of Tehran urban deteriorated areas from danger.

### Literature review

The first official measures have been adopted after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development for the renovation of urban historical textures in the form of certain projects. During the years before the revolution, some planning cases have been already conducted such as the renovation of Shiraz historical areas. Ministry of Housing and Urban Development initially faced urban deteriorated areas renovation in Kerman entitled: "Urban Deteriorated Areas Renovation Plan". An office was then set up in the Housing Department for such initiatives, which was legally established as the organization of Construction and Urban Improvement in 1997. For a long time, this organization runs multiple plans under different names often such as reforming problematic, marginal, non-official urban deteriorated areas. Later, with the participation of the private sector, it founded five construction and improvement companies for each national region.

The practice of these firms' interventions in urban deteriorated areas led to monopolies, rent-seeking, and abundant abuses, which caused disrepute and relative shut-down. Following the housing department, various municipalities also came up with different plans to intervene in urban deteriorated areas.

In 1994, the mayor of Tehran, Karbaschi, with restoring the semi-closed renovation organization established in 1964 for often development-based micro-measures, constructed the Nawab Highway in the urban deteriorated areas and built several high-rise buildings on the other side.

In 2004, Tehran Mayor, Ghalibaf, appointed Alireza Andalib to the management of the Renovation Organization in which he worked until 2006. The most significant urban renewals took place over this period. Importantly, renovation literature promoted beyond

malformed, biased translational definitions toward more effective critics. Then, Renovation Organization criticized three approved provisions of the supreme council of urban planning as the definition of urban deteriorated areas. It clarified Tehran's degradation under instability and considered the other two as managerial provisions for prioritization.

Development of the new intervention model in urban deteriorated areas entitled "Neighborhood urban landscape renovation plan" categorized urban intervention approaches under "systematic view" and "consideration of perceptual dimension along with urban structure" constituents. The model, which was updated several times during Andalib's tenure, was abandoned after him, especially by showing partial views of Tehran's detailed plan head, Shafiq. Local facilitation centers have only remained, distorting its primary functions, reduced renovation to the house number plate aggregation.

Tehran's comprehensive planning, approved in 2007, adopted no specific measures for urban deteriorated areas and left their renewal to another project (never implemented) by identifying worn-out urban areas. Ministry of Roads and Urban Development replaced the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, which has substituted the Civil and Urban Development Organization by urban regeneration company in 2018. With the approval of the urban regeneration bill in the government Cabinet, it sought to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework of the renovation approach. In parallel, by a new approval of the supreme council of urban planning, urban deteriorated areas definition turned into a new complex matrix of over sixty elements from the previous three provisions.

From 2013, it took six years to dissolve the Civil and Improvement Organization and to formulate the Ministry's new approach during the tenure of Abas Akhoundi and Saeid Izadi and resulted in the partial closure of the state, and consequently municipality's renovation operations. Today, based on the official statistics, government incentives are no more effective; besides, detailed plans as the only legal construction document in municipality overlook urban deteriorated areas specific properties.

Tehran's detailed plan is, indeed, the legal obstacle on the way to renovate decaying houses. In addition to the lack of capital and support, it systematically caused a renovation vicious circle that resulted in the construction recession in urban deteriorated areas.

- House number plate fineness and impermeable streets in urban deteriorated areas from prevailing existing conditions and legal obligation perspective.
- Providing parking lots per residential unit in upstream rules (Department of Planning and Architecture, 2012, 5), from the perspective of construction laws, has led to

insufficient parking spaces due to the lack of multilevel structure for multistory car-park ramps for the repaired number plates. As a result, fewer residential units can be achieved which can discourage renewal economic motivation resulting from decreased density. Finally, it will diminish the urban absorption of the population.

On the other side, car ownership has increasingly grown among citizens; personal care has become the main source of livelihood for many people. Hence, in such conditions that inadequate car-parking has been predicted, on one side, existing passages would turn into car stops; and on the other side, paths social function will be also influenced (Hajialiakbari, 2017, 57). Issuance of a building permit is almost impossible without a car park. In such a process, small always gets smaller; and the result of local and legal terms in a vicious circle arrives to lower renovation of urban deteriorated areas (Fig. 1).

"Renovation vicious circle" is a cycle that originated from effective economic and legal factors in the renovation of urban deteriorated areas over long years. Assuming that the state and municipality lack a sufficient budget to repair worn-out buildings, the theory of "neighborhood secure focal point" is proposed. The first requirement of public participation in rehabilitation and benefiting from the capital of citizens is the cost-effectiveness of the construction process, which is hindered by the detailed plan: floor area ratio is defined by available car-parking. So, worn-out buildings may not be supposed to enjoy the given area ratio, and there will be no economic renovation. For defensible arguments, the detailed plan can prevent the demand for parking on the street. However, it is merely one side of the coin; the other side is the depression that resulted from the renovation process.

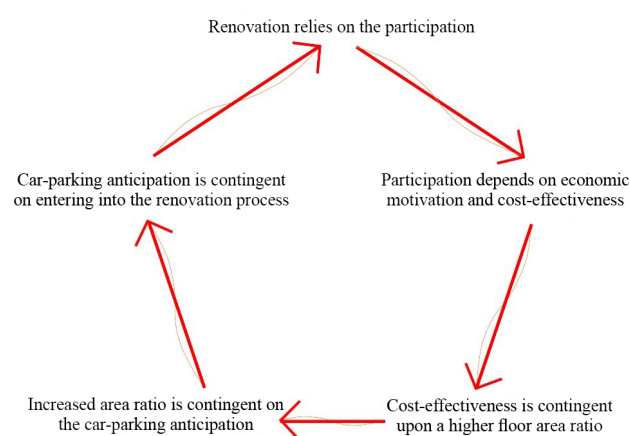


Fig. 1. Stagnation in the renovation of urban deteriorated areas originated from the legal and environmental vicious circle. Source: Author.

### Theory of neighborhood secure focal point

“Neighborhood secure focal point” is a set of local services based on shared multilevel parking located in the heart of the neighborhood preferably in the proximity of other local services such as mosques and parks. The houses within this territory can foresee emergency parking in the secure focal point where the floor area ratio is allowed up to the urban common ceiling limit. The omission of parking provision makes downsizing possible. In such an approach, car parking is prohibited on streets and alley widening is avoided unless necessary. Occupancy rates considering the light provision increase up to 100% in smaller lots. If the whole land is not allocated to the construction, by maximum floor area ratio, the plate number wall will be removed and the yard will merge to the alley. Landscapes in alleys supplied with green areas as community spaces. Car access to the home for services, emergencies, as well as access to already home parking is managerially foreseen. The secure focal point is the hub of community activities in the neighborhood that provides a multi-purpose center with the grocery market for rituals and associations at the neighborhood mosque or center. This complex is the neighborhood landmark designed as a suspended garden by green architecture. Also, it is viewed as part of the neighborhood area where the municipality is obliged to maintain held in common.

Realization of the neighborhood secure focal point strategies is the appropriate response for the eight development purposes in urban deteriorated areas where the current urban administration measures attained no justifiable achievements. Urban management, in response to such assessment, often relies on economic or legal obstacles on the way to the implementation of development projects and improving quality of life in urban deteriorated areas. The following eight principles simultaneously assess and analyze the impact of the theory of “neighborhood secure focal point” on removing limitations, product promotions, and actualization of existent potentials in urban deteriorated areas to realize rescue and renovation plans.

#### • Participation development and renovation realization

The big issue and lack of financial and human resources for management and implementation of renovating 14,000 hectares of urban deteriorated areas in Tehran have resulted in ineffective solutions over the last ten years. In 2020, based on the latest performance statistics in Tehran as stated by Nezhadbahram, around 45% in 3268 hectares of the authorized urban deteriorated areas qualified for government incentives were realized (ISNA, 2020). The remaining, due to being deprived of government incentives, experienced a recession. Further, renovation documentation in the remaining 11,000 hectares is also unavailable. Extending the average

construction rate in the aforementioned areas in Tehran, a maximum of 10% of renovation will be conjectured for all urban deteriorated areas. In this case, government and municipality may do nothing to provoke renovation as the insufficient financial resources. Recessions resulted from inflation and renovation legal restrictions, as well as the detailed plan terms synergistically demolish the prospect of any possibility of renovation prosperity. Upcoming economic conditions also indicate that in the mid-term expecting funds tailored with urban deteriorated areas requirement is almost unrealistic. Thus, the only way to save approximately half of Tehran’s population is to assign residential renovations to the people.

Excluding parking provision from licensing, the “neighborhood secure focal point” provides the maximum floor area ratio. Thus, construction is economically justified and local macro investments focus on the renovation. The economic advantage of the secure focal point policy brings about the sustained renewal of worn-out houses throughout Iran, especially in the metropolises where housing is more expensive, with none government resources. The experience of floor area ratio incentives or elimination of parking provision in recent years also refers to the rush of owners for renovation.

#### • Improvement of the urban spatial quality

Analysis of the latest municipality projects on extending micro-scale collective spaces at neighborhoods (approved by the city council); improve the quality of urban deteriorated areas alleys (e.g colorful alleys and other projects of Beautification Organization), as well as green and communal spaces in old neighborhoods comparing the whole city (Hadi Zonooz & Barmaki, 2010, 58-59), on one side; and comparing population density in comparison with the urban mean, on the other side, demonstrate that urban deteriorated areas suffer from lack of social space, too. The small neighborhood, high density, and lack of car-parking have made residents park their cars on streets such that lanes merely benefit from minimum free space. Hence, in the absence of communal spaces, streets and sidewalks also lose their social function as a consequence of parked cars on the streets.

The policy of “neighborhood secure focal point” revives urban life to routes and lanes by offering independent car parking so that not only smooths the driving traffic but also enables pedestrians to move freely in the sidewalks. Hence, it restores the concept of “alley” and adds place belonging and attachment via creating a collective memory among the neighborhood residents; it also expands social monitoring of urban life. All these factors would result in the promotion of quality of life in the neighborhood. The aforementioned domains are unique opportunities to increase the presence of natural elements in cities and to offer public garden.



### • Passive defense

Tehran city, undergone serious earthquakes in the previous decades, is placed in the vicinity of several active faults including Mosha, the North Tehran fault, and the North and South Rey faults with a high seismic hazard potential. It is not unlikely that similar earthquakes may occur soon with high casualties and financial losses (Saffari & Pouladvand, 2017, 109).

The most sustained measure to reduce earthquake losses is to renovate urban deteriorated areas and urban infrastructures that their quantity and extent enable short-term realization (JICA, 2000). Crisis Management Center of Tehran adopts two main approaches predicting crisis rooms and assigning population residence lands to reduce social losses of earthquakes. However, according to Hanachi, there have been built 100 crisis management rooms in Tehran (Mehr News Agency, 2020) and the predicted lands have been just marked very far from endangered textures, in low areas without necessary infrastructures. The occurrence of successive earthquakes in Iran reveals that first, the most important relief operations are delivered at the local scale, and second, earthquake-stricken people resist residing far away from their homes. So, investment in people, neighborhoods, and community empowerment (in the form of local scale) is the most appropriate action that needs to be taken (Amini, 2019).

The “neighborhood secure focal point” proposal generated an earthquake-resistant complex that provides a large indoor area for temporary accommodation of earthquake-stricken families in the closest distance to their original homes by using utilization services. The familiarity of residents, management of earthquake injuries, and decreasing the need for extended urban traffic are some relative merits of neighborhood secure focal point as the passive defense.

### • To strengthen social cohesion

In global experiences, urban immigration are of the important misfortune of urban deteriorated areas renovation; with the migration of old native residents, rich cultural values gradually disappear and sense of belonging to the home, neighborhood, and the city fades (Hosseinzadeh, Afshin Mehr & Bararpour, 2012, 125-127). Various renovation theories believe in the sustained residence and avoidance of extensive movement (displacement) as social solidarity strengthening factors. Concerning the role of social capital in urban renovation issues influenced by recent views, urban renovation in which process is prioritized to the outcome (consequence) highlights social capacity building. Thus, communities’ social capital like primary assets is considered as renovation objectives (Ziyyari, Abbasifallah, Heidari & Najafi, 2018, 407). Extensive renovation experience,

derived from the aggregation of macro plate numbers and construction of dense and high-rise buildings for various reasons including prolonged construction and owners’ termination, demonstrates that most former residents leave the neighborhood for new places during the construction stage. Thus, neighborhood social ties decrease to the minimum among new residents leading to the social and cultural crisis. The same situation happened in the Nawab project where old residents were replaced by new people ruining the sense of belonging (Sayyafzadeh, Mireii & Node Farahani, 2013, 34).

Neighborhood secure focal point -based renovation enables owners to individually restore their buildings to good condition. Keeping on to live in their neighborhood, which has now qualitatively developed can generate sustained social cohesion and fortify the spirit of community. Long-term residence in the neighborhood in addition to the continued recognition and social interactions as effective factors of growing social cohesion is one of the sustained urban development strategies.

### • Housing pattern modification and construction of affordable housing

The cost of housing in Tehran has largely ascended so that not only owning a house but also renting is almost out of reach for the deprived and young people. In the ten recent years, the housing price growth rate was 11 times higher (Karimi, 2020). Expensive houses have increasingly intensified the demand for small houses; whereas, small housing construction is refused due to the housing model and municipality building code.

Thus, two factors of “cost and size” keep housing out of reach for the middle class and young people. The government and Municipality of Tehran have introduced solutions for housing pattern modification and small-scale houses (“Reviewing municipality proposal”, 2020, 44). However, the aforementioned obstacles may impede this approach actualize.

With the authentication of existing plate numbers and elimination of the demanded floor area ratio, the “neighborhood secure focal point” plan has made the construction of small houses and changing housing patterns possible in favor of the deprived and marginalized. The economic efficiency of inexpensive micro-scale houses for owners (the rent can be considered as the economic support for the household) will result in the production boom and delivering urban housing (which is currently tending toward zero in Tehran).

### • To develop participation and citizenship concept

Participation is the urban management key term in the present and future world. Due to rigid management structures in Iran, participation development procedure has remained at its primary level. According to The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, councils are

management foundations. Local councils of Iran were firstly established in 1998, twenty years after the Islamic Revolution. Over the last 22 years, council elections have been repeated. Today, the legal break of participation in the issues of cities and villages has caused widespread dissatisfaction.

The council powers were halted at its early low levels; besides, the central government is still in charge of councils through the Ministry of Interior and governorships. Hence, city councils are indeed municipal councils. The statutory power of councils also reflects the fact that councils are only defined by the municipality (Lalemi, 2006, 82). Administrative Justice Court in its latest measure declared council assistant elections (neighborhood representatives) invalid relying on the specific interpretation of council laws (Diven-edalat, 2020).

Along with legal and structural restrictions of participation, the spatial organization of Tehran has been launched based on a modern urbanization system that emerged from the Master Plan of Tehran (the first level) (known as Gruen-Farmanfarmayeiyen design) by Victor Gruen, the American architect. Its structure was predicted to be cellular; hence, former physical-social urban divisions were wiped out.

“Neighborhood secure focal point” approach restored and gradually formed neighborhood identity through reproducing neighborhood center. In this case, the geographical and service background of local communities will emerge. The gradual development of neighborhood activities will lead to participation development and the emergence of geography-based participatory democracy. This procedure can largely respond to the serious criticism of the representative democracy city councils and council assistants run.

**• To prosper the urban economy**

Construction is the foundation of the urban economy in Tehran. In recent years, under the effect of boycotts, anti-inflationary policies of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, and municipality plans, housing construction has undergone an unprecedented downturn. As a result, municipal revenues were directly declined, and urban construction and development were also impeded. Although, by 2020, the construction budget ratio of Tehran has reached up to 47% of the total municipal budget, which showed a 43% increase in comparison to 2019, city maintenance costs (urban services) have also escalated by 58% in the budget bill of 2020 in comparison to the approved budget of 2019. Moreover, based on this budget, staff salaries and payment has grown by 34% in total (Donya-e-Eqtasad, 2019). According to Mazaheriyen, in the midway, by inflating municipality costs (especially personnel expenditures) and non-realization of projected revenue, the municipality had to formulate an amendment

to the supplementary to the budget act (Eghtesad Online, 2020). 38% budget deficient in the municipality for the first two-quarter (Taadol, 2020), affording new construction budgets, repairing and maintenance of urban infrastructure following securing inevitable costs and possible surplus (IRNA, 2020) will consequently result in the closure of many municipality construction plans and projects.

The price of materials, lands, wages, as well as legal fees as housing price determinants, have been recently tripled, which increased house average price in Tehran from 58 million Rials/m<sup>2</sup> by 2017 up to 270 million Rials/m<sup>2</sup> by 2020. It shows that the number of building permits issued within 2013-2019 should have come down to 50% (Fars News Agency, 2020).

Getting out of urban economic recession in Tehran is contingent upon macro investment and widespread participation, which are absent in Tehran municipality or the government. Hence, urban development plans and projects will be still postponed. As the head of the Tehran council, Mohsen Hashemi, in 2019, pointed out that over the seven years of the (eleventh and twelfth) government, not a single bus has been added to the urban fleet (Asr-e Iran, 2019), and no notable budget has been assigned.

Relying on the micro-capitals of citizens and according to the potential of creating added value in the existing estates via floor area ratio, the “neighborhood secure focal point” strategic plan can improve Tehran’s economy and be the first step toward urban economic prosperity. If the construction chain initiates, some huge demand will enter the market and activate about 150 affiliated jobs; consequently, it culminates in increased employment and production. Making secure focal points and renovation of urban passages by itself is fresh demand based on new financial resources coming from these projects. The emergence of such new construction projects in the city is the prominent and sustained factor of economic prosperity.

**• Establishment of Islamic Revolution Architecture style**

Despite the large extent of constructions in the decades after the Islamic Revolution, the absence of a proper architecture style fitted with the Revolution is of great concern to Iran’s managers. This relies on the citizens’ expectations from authorities to reflect their identity and community demand in the architecture and city. The fact that our historical monuments are the most significant symbols of Iranian civilization is the weakness of the architecture management system in the age of the Islamic Republic. Poor architectural management in providing an Islamic culture-based model tailored with climatic, economic, social, and technical conditions will be more evident when Islamic Republic achievements are compared

with works that orientalists have created during the twenty years of the First Pahlavi reign in Iran in terms of architectural power. Designing and building large numbers of macro-scale complexes entitled “secure focal point” in the cities and neighborhood centers is a once-in-a-lifetime chance that urban management can deal with it to attain the ideal Islamic architecture model. Urban management should learn from the experience of the last four decades a small group has made the present conditions under the shadow of political supports, and institute the foundations of sustained Islamic and Iranian identity in the field of architecture trusting in the widespread participation of experts.

## Conclusion

Large urban deteriorated areas in Tehran with over three million population, defeated concentrated renovation plans in the last two decades, increasing the risk of earthquake and death of millions of residents of urban deteriorated areas, detailed plan irrelevant to the worn-out textures, as well as lack of concentrated financial resources to

effectively implement renovations are the most significant symptoms of the greatest crisis of the human history if an earthquake occurs in Tehran. Inaction and despair of administrative and urban managers facing the reality have imposed a deadly silence on the most important issue of Tehran. The only way to get out of the crisis and turning the worn-out disaster into an opportunity for urban development and renovation is to attract the participation of real citizens and to implement renewals by public micro capitals. Although practitioners agreed on the participation strategy as the only way to meet this objective, yet, they have proposed no functional (practical) solutions. Almost all renewal projects have highlighted the need for renovation rather than how to effectively implement it. “Neighborhood secure focal point” is a comprehensive plan to activate owners of worn-out houses to prepare the conditions for improved urban quality of life and urban economic prosperity. “Neighborhood secure focal point” is a win-win game in which all owners, investors, constructors, and urban managers are equally benefited. Further studies are recommended to describe secure focal point operational plans in detail.

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