

Saving Oudlajan as a Museum Without Walls



Tehran Project 8

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Oudlājān, located at the heart of historical part of Tehran, is one of the five old main neighborhoods in this city. Dating back to 1800's, Oudlājān was a luxurious residential area, where most of noblesse Qajar royal families lived in. The most delicate architectural arts and crafts were applied in the houses in this area, and one can call each historical house a museum of the time. Public buildings and urban spaces, like qanāts, hamāms, bazaars, public gardens and tea houses served the public. Religious buildings like synagogues, churches, mosques, shrines, and saghākhānehs in close distances shows a high density of social interactions in the neighborhood. Such a symbiosis between different religions has roots in the intangible heritage still alive in the neighborhood.

Fall of Oudlājān began with the fall of Qājārs and the outset of Pahlavi Dynasty, yet the scale of destructions and reconstructions were minor until recently. During the recent decades, however, with the rise in population, various social, cultural, and economic reasons have caused degeneration of population and security threats, both for residents and historical buildings of Oudlājān. It is not an exaggeration to assert that the urban authorities are main responsible for the gradual fade of Oudlājān by simply disregarding the historical importance of the neighborhood and making it vulnerable in all aspects.

In spite of all misfortunes, Oudlājān has preserved its main characteristics as an urban cultural landscape and a potential Ecomuseum. Urban laws, regulations, restrictions, and even its registration in the national heritage list have not been able to prevent destructions and poor quality of reconstructions. The only way to preserve this unique and valuable urban texture seems to be its registration as a World Heritage Site. With this step, buildings, houses, and urban spaces, can serve as an ideal learning area about Tehran's tangible and intangible heritage, also providing local businesses for residents and memorable days and nights for tourists.

Keywords: Oudlājān, Urban Ecomuseum, Urban cultural landscape, World Heritage

1. Introduction:

Ecomuseums are place-based organizations normally run by local people that foster sustainable community development, based on in situ heritage conservation and interpretation. The model of ecomuseum was first presented in France in the early 1970s to encourage holistic interpretations of cultural heritage. The aim was to combine tangible objects, sites, and built structures with the traditions, practices, and customs associated with intangible or “living heritage.” As the idea caught on, the model was generalized to include natural heritage, including local flora and fauna, important wildlife habitats and geomorphology sites (Ecomuseum Concept, Feb2015). The word *ecomuseum* coined by French museologist H. de Varine was introduced at the Ninth General Conference of the International Council of Museums in 1971 (Varine, 1985: 5). Another French ethnologist and museologist G.H. Rivière, who regarded the ecomuseum as a mirror that the local population holds up to its visitors to be better understood so that its industry, customs, and identity may command respect, developed the concept (Rivière, 1985: 2–3). An ecomuseum is a community museum that provides a unique mechanism for community engagement, in which community members work to preserve and learn from tangible and intangible heritage in its living form. Through community consultations, stakeholders agree on natural and cultural assets that they value and create plans to ensure they are preserved and used to foster a culture of sustainability. Unlike a traditional museum, ecomuseums do not necessarily gather objects in a museum facility. Instead, they enable communities to preserve valued objects, sites, and cultural practices where they exist; enhancing their visibility and the contributions, they make to community development activities. The ecomuseum is a revolutionary concept compared to traditional museum because it considers the social dimension. The environment is described through history, culture, landscapes and human activities linked to the places that generated them (The ecomuseum an innovative educational methodology to discover the earth sciences, 2014). Regarding the definitions of ecomuseums and the various features of them that are mentioned above, if a cultural landscape is supposed to be an ecomuseum, it should fulfill the conditions pinpointed.

In the metropolitan area of Tehran, Oudlājān is the only urban fabric that has preserved its traditional and social structures, historical architecture and urban appearance. The neighborhood is rich in terms of architectural heritage and the inhabitants are very willing to participate in the future development of the neighborhood, a potentiality that can ease the future growth of the quarter, through a collective process of learning and devising plans, into a lively, tenantable and constructive area that buster local economy along with embracing tourism industry.

2. Case Study:

Oudlājān is one of the five neighborhoods that formed the body of the seventeenth century Tehran. It has a precious heritage. In the Qajar era (1795-1925) Oudlājān had the largest population of Tehran and different social classes, including noble families, lived there. In 1960s by subsequent expansion of Tehran and formation of new neighborhoods, the process of population movement began and the original inhabitants of the quarter started to move to new neighborhoods. The area gradually felled into the hand of low-income classes particularly immigrants and workers. Meanwhile, Bazaar, as a strong economic and political parameter, began to dominate the neighborhood. As a result, a significant proportion of residential buildings converted to bazaar-related spaces such as business units, workshops and warehouses and the neighborhood largely lost its residential function. The neighborhood declined in all urban, economic and social aspects. Since 1970s, several plans have been proposed to revitalize this neighborhood, but none of them has actually been implemented and

the process of deterioration still continues. (Naiemeh Reza'I, Pirooz Hanachi, 2015:1)

3. Research Method:

The research method in this paper is a combination of *Action Research* and *Comparative Study*. Action research is a strategic method for generating information; it integrates a wide range of methods to create new understandings that support the solving of practical problems and the democratic control of solutions by participants (Levin, Martin, 2007). The authors of this study are carrying out action research at Oudlājān from 2011 until present. Throughout this period, participative observations were made and questionnaire investigations and fieldwork interviews were conducted not only to record events in the field but also to elucidate why and how local people are able to affect ecomuseum development. This Action Research includes recording the distressed buildings in the historical context of Oudlājān by several groups of students as well. Methodologically, this paper will compare features and potentials of Oudlājān for being an Ecomuseum based on the observations and results of the study in these years, with 21 principles of Ecomuseums that are pinpointed in the literature by researchers up to now.

4. Action Research Findings:

Action research has been carrying out in the recent five years as a semi-voluntary project for documenting the remaining heritage of Oudlājān. Several groups of students and individuals who were interested in exploring the historical context of Oudlājān or chose to conduct their class or thesis projects based on this context contributed to this action research. The aim was to produce and collect different layers of data that covers divergent themes, from architectural monuments and elements to the oral history, from sustainable traditional water-supply structures to the flora and vegetation. The findings can be discussed in four topics as follows: a) The urban fabric b) Architectural heritage c) Sustainable structures d) Social structure




The urban fabric of the district features many of the unique characteristics of traditional cities in central Iran. This includes a system of alleys, dead-ends and bazaars all formed in a complicated organic pattern of hierarchical relations. These arteries are as narrow as possible, to provide shade in the unbearable hot season of Tehran. The facades on the sides of arteries display the least details and ornaments, thus leaving the inside building as a cabinet of curiosity waiting for the inquisitive visitor. Traditionally this scheme of external simplicity is employed to fade out class difference; thus backing social sustainability.

The area is dotted by numerous exquisite buildings. Private buildings (i.e. Houses) alongside with public buildings, including mosques, shrines, vaulted bazaars, public baths and synagogues display the masterly works of decorative arts of Qajar era, that include tile-work, mirror-work, stucco carving, brick carving, stone carving and painting. The most luxurious edifices are the houses built for the nobles of the time. These are the most distressed as well. In accordance to the architectural value, buildings' situation and the financial resources of the owners, the action research has proposed three alternative usages for the existing houses as historic house museum, boarding house and private-residential.

The main sustainable structure in the area is its underground aqueduct: *Kariz* or *Ganat*. Thanks to the existence of several Karizes the formation and development of the quarter has become possible throughout the centuries. At present time none of the aqueducts are in actual use. By the instauration of these constructions, adequate water would be provided for the flora, which forms another characteristic of the area: spontaneous large *Pinus Nigras* (or black pine of Tehran) have marked every part of the quarter. Once popular in Tehran, the tree is now seldom planted, yet it is found in large

numbers in Oudlājān. People use their courtyards to grow vegetable, in some cases saffron, and fruit trees including grape, persimmon, walnut, pear and fig is still planted. Another additional advantage of rehabilitation of karizes of the area is revitalizing a series of historical data related to hydrology, as well as indigenous knowledge, and return it back to the public and students.

Interviews show that the inhabitants are willing to contribute in devising plans for rehabilitation of their neighbourhood. Living traditions link people to each other and traditional institutions, like mosques, are still used for social gathering and networking. On the case of major issues, actions are taken uniformly after reaching to collective decisions. Local people have valuable oral history knowledge on their own neighbourhood and this makes them the most lively story-tellers and deserving tour-guides.

		
<p>Figure1. Stucco carving combined with mirrorwork decorations</p>	<p>Figure 2. Brick carving sample on Oudlajan portals</p>	<p>Figure 3. Hajj Reza Khan house, sample of noble residences</p>

5. Ecomuseums Principles:

Today a myriad of ecomuseums are in operation around the world, especially in Europe and Asia, in various forms. Some of them cover large areas; others are small, isolated areas. Some provide a platform for local arts and crafts; others reflect local business and related skills. Some rely on tourism; others are mostly relying on encouraging community engagement. Although there is this variation, ecomuseums have tendency to share a number of common features (Davis2011). In the case of ecomuseums mostly due to the multidisciplinary approach used in the creation of their theoretic foundation the traditional type of museum classification cannot be applied (V.M. Kimeev, 2008). Ecomuseums have several characteristics that distinguish them from the other obsolete types of museums (Varine, 1985: 5; Yureneva, 2003: 459; Kaulen, 2005: 35). Here, the main common activities of ecomuseums are explained and after that Table.1 maintain the basic principles of the ecomuseums around the world which should be pondered to be compared with the potentials of Oudlājān in the following paragraphs.

A brief portrayal of ecumeums is that they occupy a definable region filled by local residents, where people work together to adapt to a changing world throughout development processes that show their communities, their landscapes, and their ways of life to other groups of people. The stakeholders often include local businesses, heritage and community groups, and local decision-makers, and their work usually requires restoration, and activities for attracting tourists. With all these efforts together, they can create a ‘museum’ as they identify and features that reflect the cultural and natural heritage

of the area, including past and current businesses, and potential chances (Ecomuseum Concept, Feb2015). Consequently, we can call this process a ‘high-capacity group,’ that only with this process ecomuseums can avail communities of staying thriving and prosper, with a concentration on sustainability and principles that create a distinctive and identifiable place. Table.1 presents 21 principle which are explained by *Peter Davis* in “Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place”. According to the 21 Ecomuseum Principles, an ecomuseum should “be steered by the local community”, “allow for public participation from all the stakeholders and interest groups in all the decision-making processes and activities in a democratic manner”, “stimulate joint ownership and management with input from local communities, academic advisors, local businesses, local authorities and government structures”, and “depend on substantial active voluntary efforts by local stakeholders (Liu, Lee, 2015). Figure.4 shows the sustainable outcomes of changing a cultural landscape to an ecomuseum.

Table.1.The 21 Principles of Ecomuseums (Davis, 2011).

Numbers of Principle	Explanation of the Principle
1	Cover a wide area.
2	Consist of selected environments in the cultural landscape.
3	Strive to activate the visitors and make the cultural heritage accessible.
4	Care for what already exist.
5	Be dependent on active voluntary efforts.
6	Appeal to local inhabitants in an effort to create a feeling of local identity.
7	Be in a continuous process of evolution, where new features and improvements both long term and short term are introduced into the development program.
8	Aim to show the whole – from the general to the specific.
9	Collaborate with artists, craftsmen, writers, actors and musicians.
10	Promote research by means of study circles and at an academic level.
11	Aim to illustrate the connection between technology and the individual, between nature and culture, between past and present, between then and now.
12	The adoption of a ‘fragmented site’ policy that is linked to in-situ conservation and interpretation.
13	The empowerment of local communities
14	The potential for interdisciplinary and for holistic interpretation which is usually seized.
15	Be steered by the local community.
16	Allow for public participation from all the stakeholders and interest groups in all the decision-making processes and activities in a democratic manner.
17	Stimulate joint ownership and management with input from local communities, academic advisors, local businesses, local authorities and government structures.
18	Conventional views of site ownership are abandoned, conservation and interpretation of sites is carried out via liaison, cooperation and development of partnerships.
19	Be founded on the interaction between culture and tourism.
20	Be based on joint efforts of local authorities, associations and various communities.
21	Strive to preserve, restore and reconstruct.

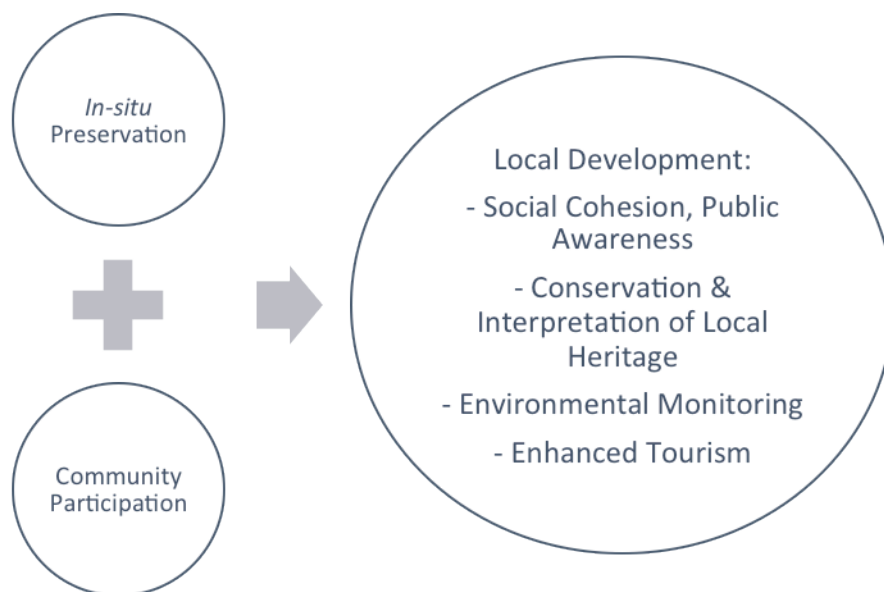


Figure 4. Sustainable Outcomes of an Ecomuseum

6. Ingenuous Potentials of Oudlājān to be an Ecomuseum:

The brief overview on the ecomuseum principles regarding the 21 Ecomuseum Principles and related research, shows that the main issues of ecomuseums are comprehensively addressed (Davis, P. *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place*, 2nd ed.; A & C Black: Edinburgh, UK, 2011.). Here, according to the studies on Oudlājān, the comparison between Oudlājān and the principles of ecomuseums are discussed to clarify the claim that this historical and cultural area in the heart of Tehran has the potentials for being an ecomuseum. The following features of the area accurately justify the mentioned principles.

- Oudlājān is located in a wide area of historical context of Tehran having outstanding cultural values.
- The unique architectural and urban features such as building entrance embellishments or the tight passages in the context provide the visitors with accessible cultural heritage of the area.
- As Oudlājān is a representative of historical architecture and urban design of Tehran, consistently has been studied by various scholars including groups of students and academicians.
- There are a wide range of evolutionary process in the comprehensive and detailed plan of the area that are introduced annually by municipality although the context has been improved and revitalized partly by the effort of voluntary works.
- Despite of a large area of distressed parts in neighborhood, local people always welcome the projects, which create the local identity of the area, with open arms.
- The appealing passages of Oudlājān which start from a first-grade street (*Pamenar* or *Mostafa Khomeini*) and end to lots of tight and dead-end passages, are capable to show the whole context from the general to specific details in itself.

- There are active local communities inside that are inclined to cooperate with authorities for preserving the site.

Oudlājān has the potential that if becomes an ecomuseum, activates the local economy by the policy of tourist attraction.



Figure 5. Map of Ecomuseum-like facilities in Oudlājān

7. Conclusion:

The features of ecomuseums that depend on local community and authorities' engagement, provide a framework for volunteer-based community actions that bring a range of stakeholders together to make informed and democratic decisions about common concerns and the tangible and intangible principles of the cultural and natural heritage of their area. As mentioned before, the goal of changing a cultural landscape to an ecomuseum is to understand today based on the past, and to apply this understanding in ways that help residents care to local issues. In this way, an ecomuseum is a valuable "mirror" that a society can use for self-assessment and for weighing different options as changes happen.

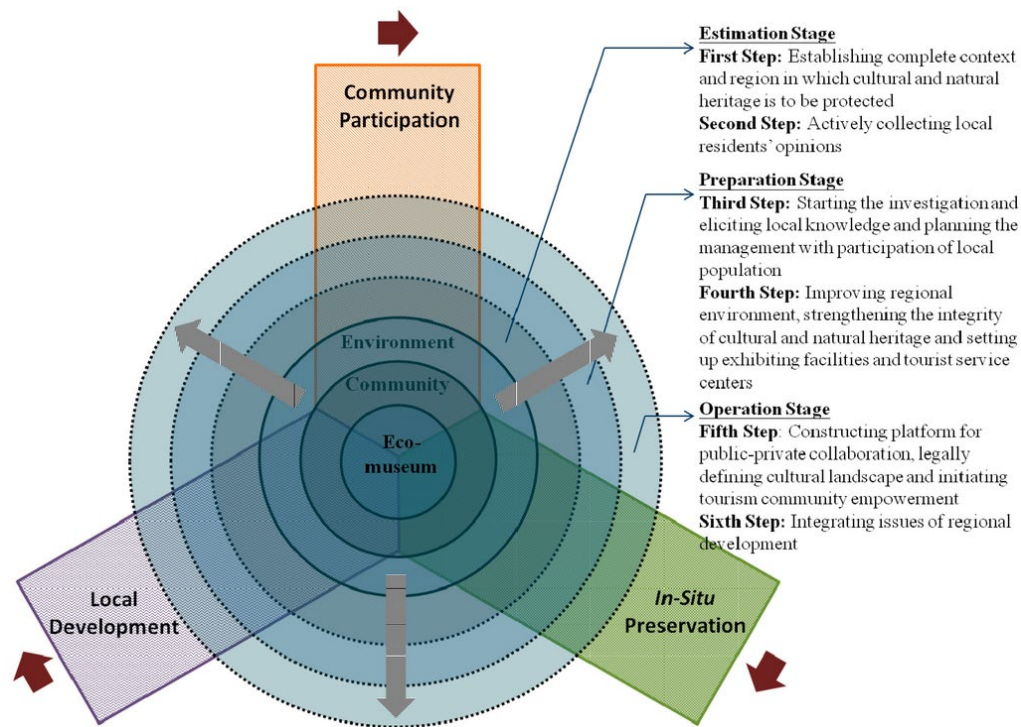


Figure 6. Proposed process of development of ecomuseums in Oudlājān (Liu et al, 2015)

In conclusion, the assumption of the development of ecomuseums in Oudlājān is based on all society engagement; consultation and collaborative decision-making that generates participation and support from a wide range of community residents. Society engagement development in this context is viewed as an ongoing negotiation of values and common interests that includes both natural and cultural heritage, as well as both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Since only ecomuseums are currently helping the reproduction of fundamental ethnic values and cultural traditions and the preservation of the environment in which local cultures have traditionally existed, this paper suggests that Oudlājān become an ecomuseum to save its valuable heritage and history for next generations.

One of the functions of a museum is educating the visitor, in formal or informal way. This function is even more important in an ecomuseum. In Oudlājān, almost the whole area can serve as astonishing learning tools for school kids, mid or high school students, or students of architecture, urban design, arts and crafts related to architecture, tourism, and many other fields. Presence of these students, besides reactions of the residents to such presence by providing their needs like workshops, coffee houses, galleries, restaurants, public or semi-public, open or semi-open gathering places, art shops, stationaries, and so on can turn Oudlājān to a vivid place, that people enjoy being there and learn more about their history, their identity, and their city.

From a practical perspective, the development of an ecomuseum can be divided into three stages of “estimation”, “preparation”, and “operation”. Within these three stages, six steps and 11 tasks are identified (Figure 6). In the first stage, beyond establishing the context, actively collecting local residents' opinions is important. Local residents should be eligible to express their ideas in the first stage. In the second stage, before the infrastructure is constructed, an investigation should be done, and a plan for the managing the ecomuseum that includes participation of local people should be prepared. In the third stage, the three strategies in Figure 6 are applied, emphasizing the integration of regional development issues.

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