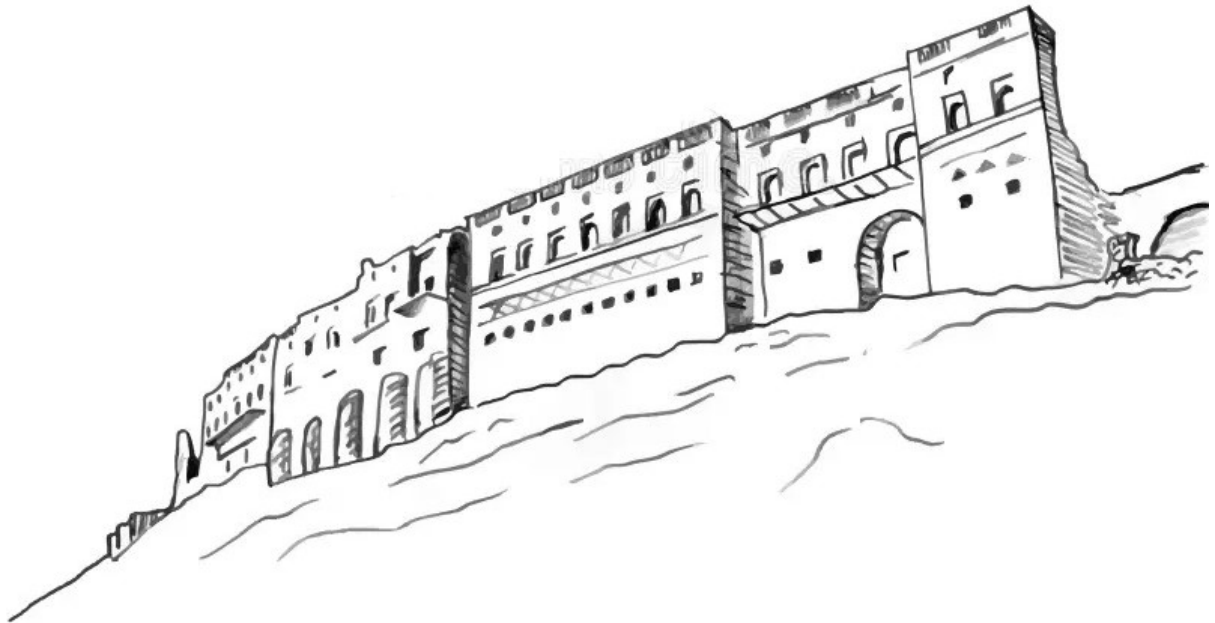


Research on Urban Design in Iraqi Kurdistan:

Challenges, Opportunities, and Community Involvement



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Abstract:

This research explores the field of urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan, focusing on its background, historical evolution, urban centers and infrastructure, preservation of architectural heritage, community involvement, and key opportunities. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the urban design context in Iraqi Kurdistan, identify challenges and opportunities, and emphasize the importance of community engagement in the design process. The research highlights the need for sustainable and culturally sensitive urban development, preservation of architectural heritage, and the integration of local knowledge and community aspirations. It also offers recommendations for policy frameworks that promote inclusive and sustainable urban design practices. By examining the unique characteristics and dynamics of Iraqi Kurdistan, this research contributes to the broader discourse on urban design and provides insights for future planning and development in the region.

1. Background information on Iraqi Kurdistan and its urban development.

Background information on Iraqi Kurdistan and its urban development sets the stage for understanding the context in which urban design has evolved in the region.

Geographic Location:

Iraqi Kurdistan refers to the semi-autonomous region located in northern Iraq. It shares borders with Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, and the rest of Iraq to the south and west.

The region encompasses three main governorates: Dohuk, Erbil (also known as Hewler), and Sulaymaniyah.

Historical Significance:

Iraqi Kurdistan has a rich historical and cultural heritage, with influences from ancient civilizations such as the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Persians.

The region has experienced periods of independence, conquest, and conflict throughout its history.

Autonomous Status:

Following the Gulf War in 1991 and subsequent uprisings against Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraqi Kurdistan gained de facto autonomy within the federal framework of Iraq.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established as the governing authority, overseeing various aspects of governance, including urban planning and development.

Population and Demographics:

Iraqi Kurdistan is home to a diverse population composed of various ethnic and religious groups, including Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians, and others.

The Kurdish population forms the majority and plays a significant role in the region's socio-political landscape.

Economic Growth and Stability:

In recent years, Iraqi Kurdistan has experienced relative economic stability and significant growth, primarily due to its oil reserves and a more business-friendly environment.

Economic development has led to urbanization and the expansion of cities, necessitating effective urban planning and design.

Urban Centers:

The major urban centers in Iraqi Kurdistan include Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk, which have witnessed rapid urbanization and infrastructure development.

Erbil, the capital city of Iraqi Kurdistan, has experienced notable growth and is known for its historical sites, modern skyline, and emerging business district.

Infrastructure and Services:

Urban development in Iraqi Kurdistan has focused on improving infrastructure, including transportation networks, utilities, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and recreational spaces.

The development of infrastructure has played a crucial role in attracting investments and promoting urban growth.

Socio-Political Factors:

The region's unique political dynamics, with the autonomous government of Iraqi Kurdistan operating within the federal framework of Iraq, have influenced urban planning and development.

Political stability, security challenges, and intergovernmental relationships have had implications for urban design and governance.

Understanding the background information on Iraqi Kurdistan and its urban development is essential for comprehending the factors that have shaped the region's cities and urban areas. It provides a foundation for exploring the challenges and opportunities associated with urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan.

2. Historical evolution of urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The historical evolution of urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan has been shaped by various historical, cultural, and socio-political factors. Here is an overview of the key aspects of the historical evolution:

Ancient Civilizations:

Iraqi Kurdistan has been home to several ancient civilizations, such as the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Persians. These civilizations had their urban centers with well-organized layouts and architectural features.

Ancient cities like Nineveh, Nimrud, and Urartu bear witness to the urban planning principles and design elements of their time.

Ottoman Empire:

During the Ottoman Empire's rule, Iraqi Kurdistan was part of the larger Ottoman administrative structure.

Urban areas within Iraqi Kurdistan saw some development during this period, with the construction of mosques, bazaars, and public buildings that influenced the urban fabric.

British Mandate Period:

After World War I, the region came under British control as part of the League of Nations mandate.

The British influence introduced some urban planning practices, including the establishment of administrative centers and infrastructure projects.

Independent State of Kurdistan (1946):

In 1946, a brief period of independence occurred with the establishment of the Mahabad Republic in Iranian Kurdistan, which encompassed parts of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Although short-lived, this period laid the groundwork for Kurdish nationalism and the aspiration for self-rule.

Saddam Hussein Era:

Under Saddam Hussein's regime, urban development in Iraqi Kurdistan was restricted, and there were attempts to suppress Kurdish identity and culture.

Many towns and cities suffered neglect, and urban planning was often focused on control rather than quality of life.

Post-Gulf War Autonomy:

Following the Gulf War in 1991 and the subsequent uprisings against Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Kurdistan gained de facto autonomy within the federal framework of Iraq.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established, which allowed for more self-governance and decision-making powers.

This period marked a turning point in the urban development of Iraqi Kurdistan, with a renewed focus on infrastructure, city planning, and urban design.

Modern Urban Development:

Since the 1990s, cities in Iraqi Kurdistan have experienced rapid urbanization and significant development.

Major cities like Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk have witnessed the construction of modern buildings, infrastructure, and public spaces.

The urban design has aimed to blend traditional Kurdish architectural elements with contemporary influences, often reflected in the cityscape.

Preservation of Cultural Heritage:

Iraqi Kurdistan also places importance on the preservation of its cultural heritage.

Efforts have been made to protect historical sites and integrate them into urban design plans.

Ancient citadels, archaeological sites, and traditional houses are often incorporated or restored, maintaining a connection to the region's rich history.

The historical evolution of urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan reflects a complex interplay of historical influences, political dynamics, and periods of growth and constraint. Understanding this historical context is crucial for assessing the current state of urban design, identifying challenges, and formulating strategies for sustainable and culturally sensitive urban development in the region.

3. Urban Centers and their Infrastructure: Linking Urban Design in Iraqi Kurdistan

Urban centers in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk, have witnessed significant growth and development over the years. The infrastructure within these urban centers plays a crucial role in shaping urban design and influencing the overall functionality and livability of the cities. Here are key aspects of urban centers and their infrastructure linking to urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan:

Transportation Networks:

Urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan includes the planning and development of transportation networks to facilitate efficient movement within and between cities.

This includes road networks, public transportation systems (such as buses), and the integration of sustainable transportation modes like cycling and walking.

Well-designed transportation infrastructure is essential for reducing congestion, improving accessibility, and enhancing the overall urban experience.

Utilities and Services:

Urban design encompasses the provision of essential utilities and services in urban centers.

This includes water supply and sanitation systems, electricity and power infrastructure, waste management systems, and telecommunications networks.

Effective planning and integration of these utilities and services are crucial for ensuring the functionality and quality of life within urban areas.

Housing and Building Infrastructure:

Urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan involves the development of residential areas and building infrastructure.

This includes the construction of housing complexes, apartment buildings, and mixed-use developments.

Considerations such as architectural style, density, and access to amenities are important for creating sustainable, comfortable, and inclusive living spaces.

Public Spaces and Amenities:

Urban centers require well-designed public spaces and amenities that promote social interaction, recreation, and cultural activities.

This includes parks, plazas, pedestrian-friendly streets, public squares, and community facilities such as libraries, community centers, and sports complexes. Incorporating these elements into urban design enhances the livability, well-being, and sense of community within the urban centers.

Economic and Commercial Infrastructure:

Urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan also includes the development of economic and commercial infrastructure to support business activities and economic growth.

This includes commercial districts, business parks, industrial zones, and marketplaces.

Well-designed economic and commercial infrastructure can attract investments, stimulate job creation, and contribute to the overall prosperity of urban centers.

Environmental Considerations:

Sustainable urban design principles in Iraqi Kurdistan emphasize environmental considerations.

This includes the integration of green spaces, urban forestry, and sustainable water management practices.

Urban centers need to prioritize environmental sustainability to mitigate the impact of urbanization and promote a healthy and resilient urban environment.

The infrastructure within urban centers plays a significant role in shaping the overall urban design and quality of life in Iraqi Kurdistan. Well-planned and integrated infrastructure is essential for creating functional, sustainable, and livable urban areas that meet the needs of the growing population and promote economic and social well-being.

4. Preservation and Integration of Architectural Heritage.

The preservation and integration of architectural heritage is a crucial aspect of urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan. This topic focuses on the efforts to protect and incorporate historical and cultural architectural elements into the design and development of urban areas. Here's an overview of the key aspects related to the preservation and integration of architectural heritage in Iraqi Kurdistan's urban design:

Historical Significance:

Iraqi Kurdistan boasts a rich architectural heritage, influenced by various civilizations throughout history. This heritage includes traditional Kurdish architectural styles, as well as influences from ancient Mesopotamian, Persian, and Islamic civilizations. The historical significance of these architectural styles and structures contributes to the cultural identity and sense of place in urban areas.

Preservation of Architectural Heritage:

Preserving architectural heritage involves identifying, protecting, and conserving historically significant buildings, structures, and urban spaces. In Iraqi Kurdistan, this can include historical citadels, ancient ruins, traditional houses, and religious sites. Preservation efforts often focus on restoring and maintaining the architectural integrity, materials, and craftsmanship of these heritage structures.

Integration into Urban Design:

Integrating architectural heritage into urban design involves finding ways to incorporate historical elements and structures into the contemporary urban fabric. This can be achieved through adaptive reuse, where historic buildings are repurposed for modern functions, such as museums, cultural centers, or boutique hotels. Integrating heritage structures into the urban fabric helps preserve the cultural identity, provides a link to the past, and enhances the aesthetic appeal of the cityscape.

Design Guidelines and Policies:

Developing design guidelines and policies that prioritize the preservation and integration of architectural heritage is crucial. This involves creating regulations and standards that ensure the protection of historical structures, encourage their integration into new developments, and guide the design of new buildings in a manner that complements the existing architectural context.

Cultural Tourism and Economic Benefits:

Preserving and integrating architectural heritage can also have economic benefits. Historical buildings and sites attract cultural tourism, contributing to the local economy. By preserving and promoting architectural heritage, urban design can support sustainable tourism and create opportunities for cultural exchange and economic development.

Community Engagement:

Incorporating the perspectives and involvement of local communities is essential in the preservation and integration of architectural heritage. Engaging with community stakeholders, including residents, cultural organizations, and heritage experts, helps ensure that preservation efforts align with local values, aspirations, and needs.

By exploring the preservation and integration of architectural heritage in Iraqi Kurdistan's urban design, researchers can gain insights into the importance of cultural identity, sustainable development, and community participation. This research topic highlights the significance of safeguarding and celebrating the region's architectural heritage while shaping contemporary urban spaces.

5. Importance of community involvement in urban design.

Engaging local communities in the urban design process ensures that the development of cities and towns reflects their needs, aspirations, and cultural values. Here are key points highlighting the importance of community involvement in urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan:

Local Knowledge and Context:

Community involvement brings valuable local knowledge and understanding of the context to the urban design process. Residents have firsthand experience of living in the area and possess insights into the local culture, history, and social dynamics. By involving the community, urban designers can tap into this knowledge and incorporate it into the planning and design decisions, leading to more contextually appropriate and responsive urban environments.

Participatory Decision-making:

Community involvement promotes participatory decision-making, where residents have the opportunity to actively contribute their ideas and opinions. This collaborative approach ensures that the diverse perspectives and needs of the community are considered, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment. When community members have a stake in the design process, they are more likely to support and embrace the resulting urban interventions.

Cultural Preservation:

Iraqi Kurdistan has a distinct cultural identity, and community involvement in urban design helps preserve and promote this cultural heritage. By involving community members, their cultural values, traditions, and architectural preferences can be integrated into the design process. This approach fosters a sense of pride, maintains cultural continuity, and creates a unique identity for urban areas that reflects the aspirations and values of the community.

Enhancing Livability and Well-being:

Community involvement ensures that urban design projects prioritize the well-being and livability of residents. By actively involving the community, designers can understand their needs for green spaces, recreational areas, social infrastructure, and other amenities. This collaborative approach helps create inclusive, accessible, and people-centered urban environments that promote the physical and mental well-being of the community.

Sustainable Development:

Community involvement contributes to sustainable urban development. By engaging community members, urban designers can gather insights on environmental concerns, resource management, and sustainable practices. Community input can help shape designs that prioritize environmental sustainability, such as integrating green spaces, promoting energy efficiency, and encouraging walkability and public transportation. This involvement fosters a sense of environmental stewardship and long-term sustainability.

Social Cohesion and Community Building:

Engaging the community in urban design processes strengthens social cohesion and community building. It provides a platform for dialogue, collaboration, and shared decision-making, fostering a sense of belonging and social connections among residents. By involving diverse community groups, such as youth, women, and marginalized populations, urban design can address social inequalities and promote inclusive urban spaces that cater to the needs of all residents.

In conclusion, community involvement in urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan is crucial for creating livable, culturally sensitive, and sustainable urban environments. By valuing local knowledge, promoting participatory decision-making, and preserving cultural heritage, urban designers can develop cities and towns that reflect the aspirations and needs of the community, enhancing the quality of life for residents and fostering a sense of pride and ownership in their built environment.

6. Identification of key opportunities for urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Revitalization of Historical Centers:

Iraqi Kurdistan has rich historical centers with significant architectural heritage. There is an opportunity to revitalize and regenerate these areas by preserving and integrating historical buildings and spaces into urban design plans. This can enhance the cultural identity of the region, attract tourism, and create vibrant and livable urban spaces.

Sustainable Development:

Iraqi Kurdistan can seize the opportunity to prioritize sustainable urban design practices. This includes incorporating green spaces, promoting energy-efficient buildings, implementing smart city technologies, and improving waste management systems. By embracing sustainability, the region can enhance the quality of life for residents, mitigate environmental impacts, and position itself as a leader in sustainable development.

Mixed-Use Development:

Encouraging mixed-use development can create vibrant and walkable urban areas. By integrating residential, commercial, and recreational spaces within close proximity, residents can have easier access to amenities and services. Mixed-use development also promotes social interaction, reduces reliance on private vehicles, and enhances the overall urban experience.

Public Transportation Systems:

Developing efficient and accessible public transportation systems can address traffic congestion, reduce air pollution, and enhance mobility within urban areas. Investing in public transportation infrastructure, such as bus rapid transit systems and light rail networks, can improve connectivity, provide affordable transportation options, and support sustainable urban growth.

Smart City Initiatives:

Embracing smart city technologies presents an opportunity for Iraqi Kurdistan to enhance urban services, improve resource management, and promote efficiency. Integration of technologies such as smart grids, intelligent transportation systems, and digital governance platforms can optimize urban operations, enhance quality of life, and create a more connected and sustainable urban environment.

7. Recommendations for policy-makers and urban planners.

Community Engagement:

Policy-makers and urban planners should prioritize community engagement throughout the urban design process. Engaging residents, stakeholders, and community organizations fosters a sense of ownership, ensures their needs are addressed, and builds consensus. This can be achieved through participatory workshops, public consultations, and collaborative decision-making processes.

Policy Frameworks:

Develop and implement comprehensive policy frameworks that support sustainable urban design principles. These policies should emphasize the preservation of cultural heritage, promote sustainable development practices, encourage mixed-use development, and prioritize accessibility and inclusivity.

Collaboration and Partnerships:

Foster collaboration and partnerships between different government agencies, private sector stakeholders, educational institutions, and civil society organizations. Collaborative efforts can leverage diverse expertise, resources, and perspectives, leading to more effective urban design solutions and implementation.

Capacity Building:

Invest in capacity building programs to enhance the skills and knowledge of urban planners and professionals. This can include training on sustainable design principles, heritage preservation, data analysis, and community engagement techniques. Building local capacity can empower local professionals to lead and implement effective urban design strategies.

Long-Term Planning:

Adopt a long-term perspective in urban planning to accommodate future growth and changing needs. Develop comprehensive master plans that provide a vision for the region's urban development and outline strategies for sustainable and inclusive growth. Regularly review and update these plans to ensure they remain responsive to evolving urban challenges and opportunities.

By identifying key opportunities for urban design and providing recommendations for policy-makers and urban planners, Iraqi Kurdistan can shape its urban areas to be sustainable, culturally rich, and responsive to the needs of its residents.

8. Predictions for future urban development.

Predicting future urban development in Iraqi Kurdistan is a speculative exercise, but there are certain trends and considerations that can provide insights into potential directions. Here are some predictions for future urban development in Iraqi Kurdistan:

Continued Urbanization:

Like many regions across the globe, Iraqi Kurdistan is likely to experience continued urbanization. The population in urban areas is expected to grow, leading to increased demand for housing, infrastructure, and services. This will necessitate careful urban planning and design to accommodate the growing population while maintaining the region's cultural heritage and identity.

Sustainable and Smart Cities:

As awareness of environmental issues and the benefits of sustainable development grows, there is a likelihood of increased emphasis on sustainable and smart cities in Iraqi Kurdistan. This may involve incorporating green infrastructure, promoting energy efficiency, implementing smart technologies, and adopting sustainable transportation systems to create environmentally friendly and resource-efficient urban environments.

Focus on Quality of Life:

With urbanization and economic development, there will likely be a growing emphasis on improving the quality of life for residents. This may involve the creation of well-designed public spaces, the development of recreational and cultural amenities, and the enhancement of social infrastructure such as schools and healthcare facilities. The goal will be to create livable, inclusive, and vibrant urban environments that cater to the needs and aspirations of the population.

Mixed-Use Developments and Urban Regeneration:

There may be a shift towards mixed-use developments that integrate residential, commercial, and recreational spaces within the same area. This approach can enhance walkability, reduce commuting distances, and promote social interaction. Additionally, there may be a focus on urban regeneration, revitalizing older areas to promote economic growth, preserve cultural heritage, and create attractive urban spaces.

Infrastructure Development:

Anticipated urban growth will necessitate significant infrastructure development. This includes the expansion and improvement of transportation networks, the enhancement of utility services such as water and sanitation systems, and the development of digital infrastructure to support smart city initiatives. Infrastructure development will be critical for accommodating population growth, improving connectivity, and supporting economic development.

Balancing Modernization with Cultural Preservation:

Iraqi Kurdistan's unique cultural heritage will likely continue to be valued and preserved. Urban development plans will aim to strike a balance between modernization and cultural preservation by integrating historical and traditional architectural elements into new designs, protecting culturally significant sites, and promoting cultural tourism.

It is important to note that these predictions are speculative and subject to various socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. The actual trajectory of urban development in Iraqi Kurdistan will depend on factors such as government policies, economic conditions, technological advancements, and the priorities and aspirations of the local communities.

9. Implications for urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Implications for urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan arise from various factors and considerations that shape the region's social, cultural, economic, and environmental contexts. Here are some key implications for urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan:

Cultural Identity and Heritage Preservation:

Iraqi Kurdistan has a distinct cultural identity and a rich architectural heritage. Urban design should prioritize the preservation and integration of cultural elements and historical structures. Incorporating traditional Kurdish architectural styles and preserving historical sites can help maintain the region's cultural identity and enhance the sense of place within urban areas.

Sustainable Development and Environmental Considerations:

As urbanization continues, there is a need for sustainable urban design practices that minimize environmental impacts. This includes incorporating green spaces, promoting energy-efficient buildings, improving waste management systems, and promoting sustainable transportation options. Urban design should prioritize environmental sustainability and support the region's efforts in mitigating climate change and preserving natural resources.

Livability and Quality of Life:

Urban design should prioritize the creation of livable and inclusive urban environments. This involves providing access to quality housing, infrastructure, public spaces, recreational amenities, and social services. Designing walkable neighborhoods, promoting mixed-use developments, and enhancing public transportation options contribute to improving the overall quality of life for residents.

Community Engagement and Participatory Design:

Engaging the local community in the urban design process is crucial. It ensures that the design solutions align with the needs, aspirations, and values of the residents. Community engagement can take the form of participatory workshops, public consultations, and collaborative decision-making processes. By involving the community, urban design can be more responsive, inclusive, and reflective of local priorities.

Economic Development and Job Creation:

Urban design can play a significant role in supporting economic development in Iraqi Kurdistan. By promoting mixed-use developments, commercial zones, and vibrant public spaces, urban areas can attract businesses, tourism, and investment. Designing spaces that accommodate economic activities and provide opportunities for job creation contributes to the region's economic growth and prosperity.

Infrastructure Planning and Connectivity:

As urban areas grow, there is a need for efficient and well-planned infrastructure. This includes transportation networks, utility services, digital infrastructure, and social infrastructure. Urban design should prioritize connectivity, accessibility, and the efficient use of resources. Well-designed transportation systems and infrastructure can enhance mobility, reduce congestion, and improve the overall efficiency of urban areas.

Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Change:

Considering the potential impacts of climate change is essential in urban design. This includes designing resilient infrastructure, incorporating green infrastructure for climate adaptation and mitigation, and promoting sustainable water management practices. Urban design should anticipate and adapt to the changing climate patterns to ensure the long-term sustainability and resilience of Iraqi Kurdistan's urban areas.

These implications highlight the importance of thoughtful and context-specific urban design approaches in Iraqi Kurdistan. By addressing these factors, urban design can contribute to the creation of sustainable, inclusive, and culturally vibrant cities and towns that enhance the quality of life for residents and promote the region's development goals.

10. Suggestions for further research in urban design

Suggestions for further research in urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan can explore various aspects of urban development, cultural preservation, sustainability, and community engagement. Here are some potential areas for further research:

Impact of Urban Design on Social Cohesion:

Investigate the relationship between urban design interventions and social cohesion in Iraqi Kurdistan. Examine how inclusive public spaces, mixed-use developments, and community-oriented design can foster social interaction, sense of belonging, and community cohesion.

Integration of Smart City Technologies:

Explore the potential of integrating smart city technologies in urban design projects in Iraqi Kurdistan. Investigate the benefits, challenges, and opportunities of implementing technologies such as IoT (Internet of Things), data analytics, and digital governance platforms to enhance urban services, resource management, and citizen engagement.

Sustainable Urban Design Strategies:

Further research can focus on sustainable urban design strategies tailored to the specific environmental and cultural context of Iraqi Kurdistan. Explore innovative approaches for incorporating renewable energy systems, green infrastructure, and sustainable transportation solutions to promote environmental sustainability and resilience.

Heritage-led Urban Regeneration:

Investigate the potential of heritage-led urban regeneration in Iraqi Kurdistan. Examine case studies and best practices of integrating historical buildings and cultural heritage into urban design projects to revitalize neighborhoods, attract tourism, and enhance the cultural identity of urban areas.

Community-Based Participatory Design:

Study the effectiveness of community-based participatory design approaches in Iraqi Kurdistan. Assess how involving local communities in the urban design process influences decision-making, project outcomes, and community empowerment. Explore the challenges and opportunities associated with community engagement in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Informal Settlements and Housing:

Research the challenges and potential solutions related to informal settlements and housing in Iraqi Kurdistan. Investigate the social, economic, and environmental implications of informal settlements, and explore strategies for improving housing conditions, enhancing affordability, and integrating informal settlements into the formal urban fabric.

Gender and Inclusive Design:

Examine the gender dimensions of urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan. Investigate how urban spaces can be designed to promote gender equality, safety, and inclusivity. Explore the role of women in urban design processes, their access to public spaces, and their participation in decision-making.

Comparative Studies:

Conduct comparative studies between different urban centers in Iraqi Kurdistan to identify common patterns, challenges, and success stories in urban design. Compare cities or towns of different sizes, contexts, and development stages to draw lessons and insights for urban planning and design strategies.

These suggestions for further research can contribute to a deeper understanding of urban design in Iraqi Kurdistan, inform policy and practice, and guide future urban development initiatives in the region.