



DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR CENTERS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES IN AZERBAIJAN

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the strategic pathways outlined in the Concept of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development of Azerbaijan, with a particular focus on the revitalization of small and medium-sized cities. It examines the pressing need to enhance the architectural and planning framework of city centers, highlighting their significance as hubs for territorial growth within the national landscape.

Drawing from B.S. Khorev's seminal work 'Small Town', the study identifies common challenges small cities face, including limited employment opportunities, inadequate resources for urban enhancement, and complexities in modernizing city centers. It underscores the shared socio-economic development issues across small towns in the republic. Through a comprehensive methodology, the research advocates for integrating public centers into broader city systems and emphasizes the importance of establishing clear criteria for strategic territorial development. Despite challenges in evaluating the viability of small-town centers, the study proposes a multifaceted assessment approach encompassing social, functional, territorial, and urban planning indicators. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the need for effective organization of public centers, the establishment of multifunctional centers to enhance urban functionality, and the creation of specialized centers to cater to specific needs such as sports, healthcare, and education.

Keywords: *Small and medium-sized cities, functional planning structure, formation, center, city*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development in Azerbaijan outlines strategic pathways for the advancement of all aspects of public life. Regarding small and medium-sized cities, particular focus is directed towards enhancing the architectural and planning framework of their centers. These cities serve as integral components of the national landscape and should therefore function as hubs for territorial growth (Rastvortseva & Manaeva, 2022). Consequently, there is a pressing need to revitalize the centers of small and medium-sized cities (Alasgarov, 1967; Alizadeh & Irandoost, 2017).

In 1972, B.S. Khorev highlighted the 'difficulties of growth' experienced by small cities in his work 'Small Town'. He identified key challenges including the rational utilization of labor resources, limited employment opportunities, sluggish developmental pace, obstacles in urban enhancement initiatives due to insufficient material and financial resources, issues surrounding the modernization of city centers, dynamics between urban cores and their peripheries, the role of small cities in shaping larger urban agglomerations, and the regulation of growth in major cities. These challenges are common across small towns within the republic, underscoring shared socio-economic development issues (Khorev, 1975).

2. METHODOLOGY

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to comprehensively analyze the socio-economic development of small and medium-sized cities in Azerbaijan. This approach ensures a robust examination of urban planning strategies, socio-economic challenges, and potential solutions for enhancing the architectural and planning framework of city centers.

A thorough review of existing literature was conducted to establish a theoretical foundation for the study. Key sources include historical and contemporary works on urban development (Alasgarov, 1967; Alizadeh & Irandoost, 2017; Khorev, 1975), as well as recent studies on urban planning and socio-economic challenges (Bakirova, 2005; Chin Wei Benny et al., 2023; Farjam & Hosseini, 2019; Zdanowska, 2021).

Analyzed were comprehensive case studies of certain small and medium-sized cities, including Lankaran, Astara, and Sheki. These case studies encompassed on-site visits, interviews with local authorities and inhabitants, and examination of urban plans and development projects. Geographic Information System (GIS) tools were used to analyze the spatial distribution of public centers, green spaces, and infrastructural elements. This helped in understanding the current urban layout and identifying areas for improvement.

Socio-economic data from national statistics agencies, including population density, employment rates, and economic indicators, were collected to quantify the challenges faced by small and medium-sized cities. Content analysis was performed on interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses to identify common themes and issues related to urban planning and development. This analysis helped in understanding the qualitative aspects of the challenges and potential solutions. Statistical analysis was conducted on survey data and socio-economic indicators to identify trends and correlations. GIS-based spatial analysis provided visual representations of urban planning issues and potential areas for development. The findings from different cities were compared to identify common challenges and successful strategies. This comparative approach helped in formulating recommendations that are applicable across different urban contexts in Azerbaijan.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the study employed triangulation by cross-verifying data from multiple sources. The insights from literature review, case studies, surveys, interviews, and spatial analysis were integrated to form a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for urban development. All data collection procedures adhered to ethical standards,

ensuring confidentiality and informed consent of all participants. The study was conducted with the approval of relevant institutional review boards and local authorities. The study acknowledges certain limitations, including the potential bias in self-reported data from surveys and interviews. Additionally, the scope of the research is limited to selected cities, which may not fully represent the diversity of urban contexts across Azerbaijan. By employing this methodology, the research aims to provide a detailed and actionable framework for the sustainable development of small and medium-sized cities in Azerbaijan, addressing both the architectural and socio-economic dimensions of urban planning.

3. ORGANIZING PUBLIC CENTERS in SMALL TOWNS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

To counter prevailing trends, it is imperative to implement measures aimed at preserving small towns. This underscores the need to formulate a comprehensive strategy for the sustainable development of small and medium-sized towns across the republic, considering not just individual towns, but the entire network. The preservation and growth strategy for small towns depends significantly on effectively organizing their public centers.

Within the primary structural and planning framework of cities, designated areas must be allocated for the placement of cultural and public service institutions catering to the population. These concentrated areas form public centers of varying levels (Figure 1). The determination of the number, composition, and positioning of these public centers in urban planning must consider factors such as city size, functional planning structure, historical evolution of the city's layout, landscape characteristics, natural features, and the city's role within the broader settlement system (Bakirova, 2005; Chin Wei Benny et al., 2023).

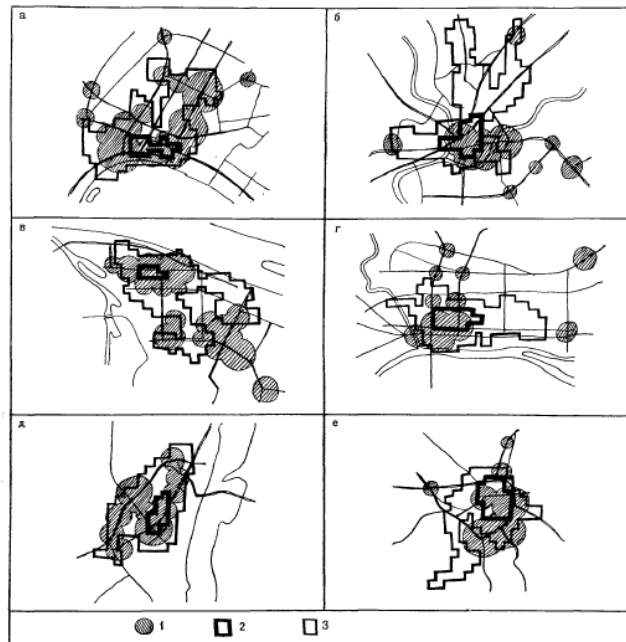


Figure 1a. Planning connection between the small town center zone and the transport accessibility zone

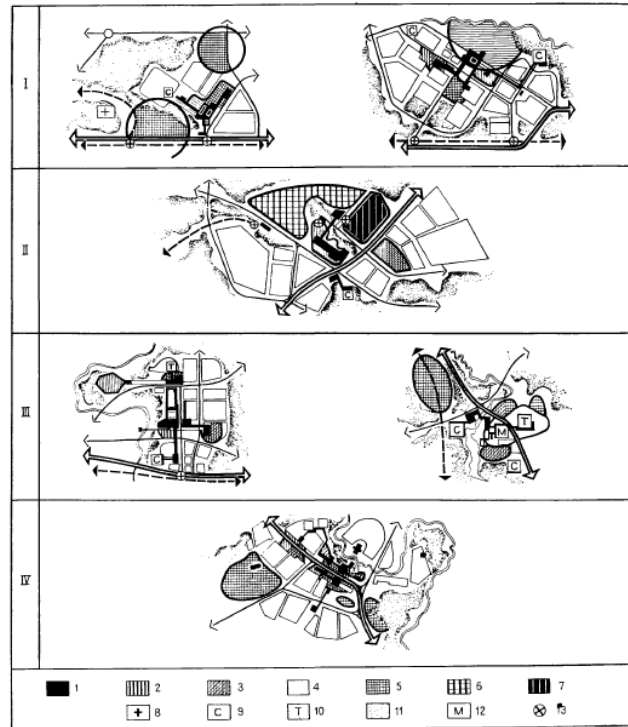


Figure 1b. Functional use of territories in the centers of small towns. 1-administrative zone, 2-zone of cultural institutions, 3-trade zone, 4-residential zone, 5-industrial zone, 6-non-production zone, 7-training zone, 8-medicine, 9-sport, 10-tourism, 11-green spaces, 12-memorial, 13-transport hub

Figure 1. Modern urban planning experience in the formation of centers of small and medium-sized cities in Azerbaijan (Yusifova, 2000)

The citywide center should be viewed as a spatial system encompassing not only the central core and its immediate surroundings but also interconnected centers within major planning districts, zones, or other structural elements (Dadasheva, 2005). Depending on the size and organization of the citywide center, it is essential to establish an interconnected network of public spaces within its confines, including main squares, streets, pedestrian walkways, and zones (Farjam & Hossieni, 2019; Zdanowska, 2021) (Figure 2).

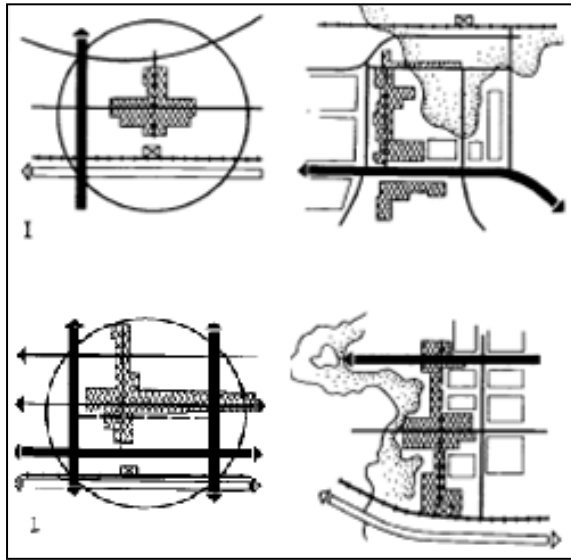


Figure 2a. Transport services for the centers of small and medium-sized cities. A-transit diversion from the center, B-center at the intersection of the district and city highways

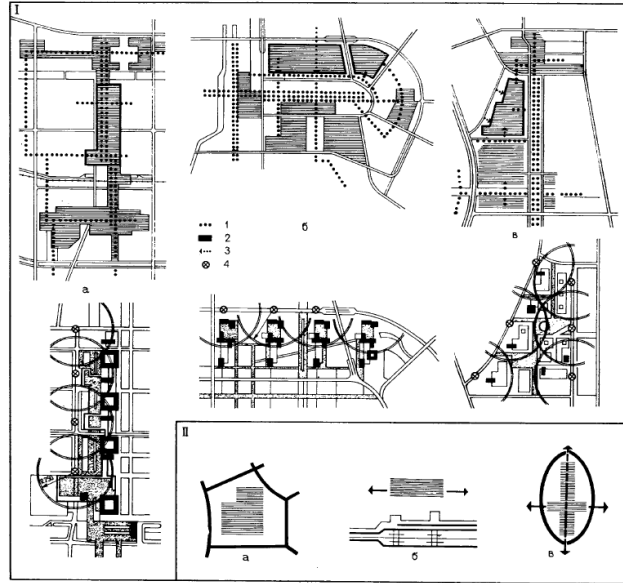


Figure 2b. Pedestrian traffic in the center of small and medium-sized cities. 1-pedestrian traffic patterns in the center, 2-pedestrian squares

Figure 2. Experience in contemporary urban planning in developing transport services for small and medium-sized cities in Azerbaijan (Yusifova, 2000)

When delineating the boundaries of the city center and its core, factors like population density, administrative significance, scale of territorial development, local urban planning regulations, and natural conditions must be taken into careful consideration.

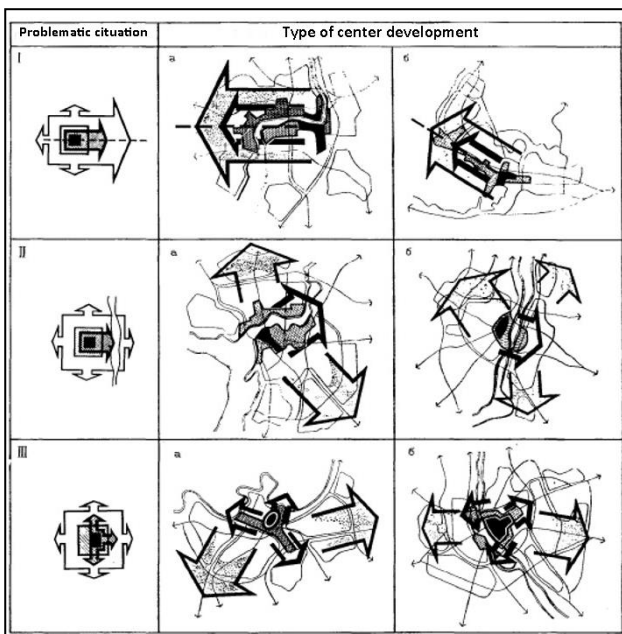


Figure 3a. Development of the center in the city's structure. 1-development center in the direction of the dominant development of the city

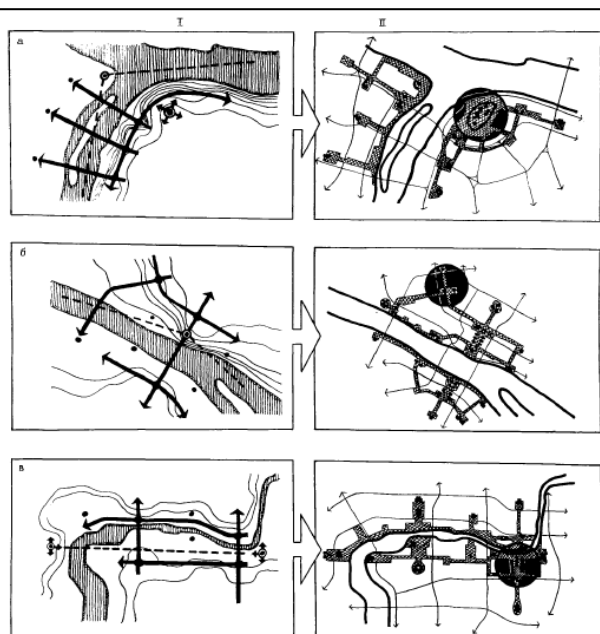


Figure 3b. The influence of landscape on the location and structure of city centers (on rivers) city

Figure 3. Graphic representation of urban development and the influence of landscape on its structure in Azerbaijan (Yusifova, 2000)

To determine the extent of public territories within the city center and its core, it is advisable to adhere to a specific benchmark of 5-8 square meters per person, calculated based on the anticipated future population of the city. In cities located in southern regions such as Lankaran, Astara, and Jalilabad, among others, efforts should be made to reduce the territory consumption indicator to around 4 square meters per person, except in areas prone to high seismic activity (Figure 3).

In small and resort towns like Sheki, Nabran, Yalama, etc., it may be appropriate to increase the specific indicator by 15-30%, but not exceeding 10-12 square meters per person.

The city center should be envisioned as a multifaceted system encompassing various functions such as management, social services, business activities, cultural and educational endeavors, entertainment, trade, public catering, household and communal services, communications, transport, housing, recreation, and tourism (Aslan et al., 2023; Azizov, 2014).

The composition of a citywide center may include functional entities related to scientific and production activities, as well as healthcare facilities, except for hospitals, dispensaries, and similar institutions that require separate zoning (Gebauer et al., 2005; Sandström et al., 2006).

Within the citywide center, public complexes, or centers of mono- or multi-functional profiles should be established in areas where institutions of relevant functions are concentrated. These complexes are essential architectural and planning components that include administrative (state, regional, and city), commercial, informational, cultural and educational, entertainment, memorial, and retail facilities, among others. They should be strategically located within the central planning area, at the heart of the center, and designed to accommodate their respective functions seamlessly (Delage et al., 2020; Ershova et al., 2017).

Multifunctional centers should incorporate a blend of business, trade, cultural, and entertainment institutions (Esopi, 2018). They should be strategically situated in various areas, including the central core, contact zones adjacent to it, entrances to the core or city center, within the central planning area, and along the main axes of other planning zones within the city.

For multifunctional centers of citywide significance in peripheral planning areas, they should encompass administrative, managerial, and research institutions linked with nearby industrial and production facilities.

Specialized centers catering to sports, recreation, healthcare, medical services, education, scientific research, and production, among others, can be established in any planning area of the city. However, those requiring substantial land space should be situated in peripheral planning zones, at city entrances, or within suburban areas (Azizov, 2020). When establishing centers within peripheral planning districts (zones), the size of their land plots should be determined based on an overall assessment of public area requirements. If they are integrated into a complex with one of the centers within a residential, recreational, or industrial-production area, the specific size of the latter's land plot may be expanded, but not exceeding 30% (Hajiyeva, 2022; Pang, 2017).

A key issue in urban redevelopment is the preservation and renewal of historically developed environments in the centers of small and medium-sized cities. In recent years, this has become increasingly important in the overall task of developing cities and their centers. This is due not only to the traditional concentration of key city center functions in these historically established areas and the significant role of modernizing old buildings in urban construction but also because the challenge of redeveloping these areas is intricately linked to achieving a balance between the "old" and the "new" in a city (Chen, 2022).

Any urbanized area, whether a large agglomeration or a rural settlement, is a complex system where various aspects of its inhabitants' lives intersect. This makes the harmonious and rational use of urban spaces a priority area of research for all sciences related to urban functioning. Currently, the concept of

sustainable development is gaining increasing importance. Its goal is to create a high-quality living environment that meets all the needs of society.

The concept of sustainable development integrates three components: economic, environmental, and social. The balanced development of these components over time forms the foundation for sustainable urban growth. A city where each component is in equilibrium will ensure the most efficient and rational use of land and resources, create a comfortable and environmentally friendly living environment, address social and economic challenges, and unlock the potential for further development.

The economic and social growth of any city is inseparable from the development and improvement of urban planning, which aims to create a comfortable, safe, and sustainable living environment. Achieving this requires a broad range of measures, including the training of qualified personnel and the application of modern technological advancements. These measures encompass the creation of a high-quality information environment, the use of innovative technologies and materials, the implementation of resource-saving techniques, and the promotion of sustainable urban planning policies (Knight, 2022). This article aims to explore the urban planning aspects of forming a sustainable urban environment and to determine their role in creating a comfortable living environment as well as fostering the economic, cultural, and ecological development of urban areas.

Within the central historical core, it is essential to designate a high-intensity functional zone where citywide business and service facilities are concentrated. This zone should be developed based on the existing elements of the city center. In this area, the greatest integration of urban functions takes place, necessitating the extensive renovation of old buildings, their adaptation to new purposes, and the significant use of underground space.

Simultaneously, special attention should be given to analyzing the stylistic characteristics of buildings, their color schemes, and the compositional significance of architectural details. During the reconstruction of the citywide centers in small and medium-sized cities of Azerbaijan, it is crucial to identify the existing territorial boundaries of the central part. Since many of these urban centers have developed historically over decades, they often lack clear boundaries.

One of the primary criteria for determining the boundary of the central core in the reconstructed cities of Azerbaijan should be the density of the existing network of institutions and enterprises of cultural and everyday significance. Quantitative characteristics of the placement of service facilities in the city centers should be utilized for this purpose. When determining the scale and direction of reconstruction, it is essential to consider that the density of service enterprises and institutions in developing cities of the republic varies and exhibits significant quantitative "resonance" due to differences in the size and functions of the cities.

When determining the established boundaries of the central zones in small and medium-sized cities, it is essential to include pedestrian streets of public service importance and urban parks directly adjacent to these zones. Currently, there are isolated examples of cooperation between service institutions in the centers of small towns in Azerbaijan, which is a positive trend. However, the construction of combined buildings for various administrative purposes (e.g., in Agjabady and Salyan), hotels, restaurants, and certain consumer service facilities (e.g., in Quba and Nakhchivan) remains insufficient.

Addressing the creation of an integrated architectural and compositional appearance for the centers of small and medium-sized cities in the country requires the adoption of comprehensive design methods and the phased implementation of reconstruction and development projects. In cases where the center is already established, comprehensive measures must be undertaken to reconstruct the entire central area.

When aiming to create a unified integrated spatial environment, establishing a harmonious relationship among three-dimensional forms that organize the public centers of cities becomes crucial. Therefore,

when designing and reorganizing urban centers at a citywide scale, it is essential to emphasize and achieve a balanced integration of vertical and horizontal elements.

Hotel buildings should serve as vertical accents in the city centers of the republic's cities. Similarly, as part of the reconstruction process, consideration can be given to preserving individual ancient monuments with prominent vertical features, such as mosques and mausoleums in certain cities (Ordubad, Quba, Nakhchivan, Shusha, etc.).

Small and medium-sized cities serve as pivotal support centers within local settlement systems, influencing the economic, demographic, social, and cultural dynamics of their surrounding territories and shaping the material and spatial environment for their populations (Cardoso, 2023). The development goals for these urban centers aim to enhance quality of life and optimize the urban environment. Achieving this requires maximizing the utilization of all available resources, including the natural and socio-economic potential inherent in these cities.

4. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The study identified several key socio-economic challenges faced by small and medium-sized cities in Azerbaijan. These challenges include limited employment opportunities, sluggish developmental pace, and insufficient material and financial resources. Data from national statistics agencies highlighted that these cities generally have higher unemployment rates compared to larger urban centers, which exacerbates issues of economic stagnation and population decline (Yusifova, 2000; Erkip et al., 2012; Isbatov, 2023).

Spatial analysis using GIS tools revealed significant discrepancies in the distribution of public centers, green spaces, and infrastructural elements within these cities. Many city centers lack cohesive planning, leading to underutilized spaces and inefficient public service delivery (Huseynov et al., 2013). The study found that the allocation of public service institutions and cultural centers is often inconsistent with the needs of the population, contributing to urban inefficiencies and lower quality of life.

Surveys and interviews conducted with residents and local officials highlighted a strong demand for improved public infrastructure and services. Residents emphasized the need for more recreational spaces, better-maintained public areas, and enhanced cultural and educational facilities. Interviews with local officials revealed constraints related to budget limitations and the need for more strategic planning support from the central government.

Lankaran

The case study of Lankaran demonstrated that targeted investments in public infrastructure, such as the renovation of parks and cultural centers, can significantly enhance the urban environment. However, the city still faces challenges related to economic diversification and attracting new businesses.

Astara

Astara's development has been hindered by its peripheral location and limited connectivity to major economic hubs. The study found that improving transport infrastructure and establishing better links with regional markets could stimulate economic growth.

Sheki

Sheki, known for its historical and cultural significance, has potential for tourism-driven development. However, the preservation of historical sites and the integration of modern amenities remain critical issues that need to be addressed to boost tourism sustainably.

The study proposed several strategic solutions to address the identified challenges and enhance the architectural and planning framework of small and medium-sized cities:

- ✓ Establishing a network of interconnected public spaces, including main squares, pedestrian walkways, and green zones, is crucial for improving urban cohesion and accessibility. This can be achieved by adhering to urban planning guidelines that recommend specific benchmarks for public space per capita, adjusted for regional variations (Van Maarten & Triggiannese, 2021).
- ✓ Creating multifunctional centers that combine business, trade, cultural, and entertainment functions can revitalize city centers and promote economic vitality. These centers should be strategically located within the central planning areas to maximize their impact (Pranciškus & Jauneikaite, 2008).
- ✓ Developing specialized facilities for sports, healthcare, education, and research can address the specific needs of the population. These facilities should be located in suitable planning zones to ensure optimal land use and accessibility.
- ✓ Formulating clear criteria for sustainable development tailored to each city's unique context is essential. These criteria should consider social, functional, territorial, and urban planning aspects to ensure the long-term viability of city centers.

Based on the findings, the study recommends several policy and practical measures for the sustainable development of small and medium-sized cities in Azerbaijan:

- ✓ Increasing the financial and material resources allocated to small and medium-sized cities is critical. This can be facilitated through central government support and public-private partnerships.
- ✓ Enhancing the capacity of local governments in urban planning and management through training and technical assistance is essential for the effective implementation of development strategies.
- ✓ Encouraging active community participation in urban planning processes can ensure that development initiatives are aligned with local needs and preferences.
- ✓ Developing integrated urban development plans that encompass economic, social, and environmental dimensions can help achieve balanced and sustainable growth.

Thus, the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the complexities of urban development in Azerbaijan's small and medium-sized cities. By adopting a comprehensive and strategic approach, policymakers and urban planners can unlock the full potential of these cities, driving sustainable socio-economic progress and improving the quality of life for residents.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the development and revitalization of small and medium-sized cities in Azerbaijan demand a holistic approach that integrates strategic planning, urban design, and socio-economic considerations. The Concept of Long-Term Socio-Economic Development in Azerbaijan sets the stage for addressing the challenges faced by these cities, emphasizing the importance of enhancing their architectural and planning framework to catalyze territorial growth.

B.S. Khorev's insights into the difficulties of small city growth underscore the complex socio-economic dynamics at play, necessitating clear criteria for devising development strategies tailored to each city's unique context. However, the absence of standardized indicators for evaluating the viability of small city centers poses a significant challenge, highlighting the need for robust scientific and methodological frameworks to guide decision-making.

Efforts to preserve the spatial compactness of city centers, optimize land use efficiency, and implement modern design solutions are essential for fostering sustainable urban development. Multifunctional

centers play a pivotal role in this endeavor, serving as hubs for diverse activities while promoting connectivity and cohesion within the urban fabric.

Ultimately, the success of these initiatives hinges on effective coordination between stakeholders, informed decision-making based on empirical data, and a commitment to promoting inclusive and sustainable urban growth. By adopting a comprehensive and strategic approach, Azerbaijan can unlock the full potential of its small and medium-sized cities, driving socio-economic progress and enhancing the quality of life for all residents.

Author Contribution Declaration

A. Idea and editing **B.** Literature Review **C.** Writing
D. Data Collection **E.** Analysis **F.** Critical Review

Malahat Eynullayeva: **A, B, C, D, E, F**

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