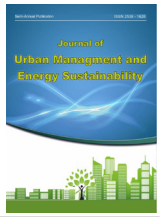
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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Reconstructing Embedded and Historical Rationalities in Urban Strategic Planning: Evidence from Six Strategic Plans of Isfahan Municipality**

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ABSTRACT

Urban strategic plans function as interpretive spaces in which planning rationalities are constructed and transformed over time. This study aims to reconstruct the embedded and historical rationalities within six consecutive strategic plans of Isfahan Municipality (2001–2026). Drawing on the linguistic turn, embedded and historical rationality, and assemblage thinking, the study employs a qualitative interpretivist design and thematic analysis, combining synchronic reading of each plan with diachronic comparison across the sequence. The synchronic analysis identifies six distinct embedded rationalities (incipient problem-oriented, managerial-administrative, normatively expansive, aspirational-visionary, differentiated governance, and consolidative-operational), while the diachronic analysis reveals four trajectory patterns (permanent core, cumulative layer, oscillating themes, and ephemeral themes) that together form a historical rationality best understood as a selective, layered, and adaptive continuity. This framework shifts the unit of interpretation from the presence or absence of individual themes to the trajectories through which planning priorities are retained, accumulated, reinterpreted, or abandoned, offering an analytical lens applicable to other cities and planning contexts where sequential series of strategic documents are available.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is more than just a means to describe reality; language defines meaning, frames the problem, and rationalizes certain forms of reasoning and decision-making (Dostal, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1994). Therefore, documents need to be considered not only sources of information, but also discourses, which represent a specific set of assumptions, values, and rationality. Such an approach to document analysis is known as the linguistic turn. The approach makes scholars focus on the implicit logics rather than the explicit messages represented in the documents. In this connection, the underlying themes of the text can be uncovered with retrospective analysis techniques and different text analysis techniques such as content analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Chakrabarty, 2008; Lemke, 2001; Ma, 2010; Pieczka, 2018; E. C. Torres & de Picado-Santos, 2025; Wankhade et al., 2022). The primary objective of these analytical approaches is to extract insights into the meaning and context of the text, thereby facilitating informed decision-making (Berger et al., 2020).

Urban Strategic documents are one of the most important textual expressions of public policy and the tools used to direct urban development (Lauermann, 2016). The development of such documents is based on expertise, field analysis, participation of stakeholders, special evaluations, and they are intended to determine the most important problems of the city and priorities, as well as plan its further development (Lauermann, 2016; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). For this reason, such documents are considered rather objective representations of urban reality and a reasonable basis for decision-making (Healey, 2004; Lauermann, 2016). However, these processes are always influenced by certain values, institutional norms, planning paradigms, and social and political assumptions that are not evident in the text itself (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; N. R. Torres, 2020). Strategic documents are not only a reflection of the urban situation; rather, they become part of creating such reality since within their visible contents lies an implicit rationality that helps select and prioritize the problems, goals, and strategies to be followed (Healey, 1996; N. R. Torres, 2020). In looking at urban strategic planning documents from this point of view, they are not only texts; rather, they become part of a more extensive socio-material assembly of planning knowledge, practice, politics, and governance (Bryson et al., 2009; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). In urban planning studies, text analysis methods have been extensively used for studying planning documents (Cai, 2021; Puri et al., 2023), analyzing citizens' perspectives on urban development (Chen et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2025), and supporting evidence-based urban decision-making through the analysis of urban data (Hu et al., 2019; Tikhonova et al., 2022; Tsai & Wang, 2021). Despite all these advantages, most studies that examine strategic documents still regard them as standalone entities and study themes, discourse analysis, and even content changes. More fundamentally, most studies have stayed on the surface of themes and discourses and hardly ever pose such questions as what planning rationality underlies these themes or how this rationality is reproduced, transformed, and reconfigured in further planning documents. The real problem with the current studies is not their insufficiency of comparisons but rather the absence of any interpretative framework that would enable one to move from themes to the planning rationalities behind them. In order to fill this gap, the current study attempts to develop an interpretive approach toward reconstructing planning rationality from strategic documents. This approach relies on the assumption that planning rationality can be reconstructed at two different levels. The first level entails the use of synchronic analysis in order to reconstruct the rationality of each document using thematic analysis. The second level involves diachronic analysis, through which the history of these rationalities is uncovered by tracing four trajectory patterns across the sequence of documents. This

research contributes to the field in three aspects. Methodologically, it provides a theoretical tool of analysis, which combines synchronic and diachronic interpretation into one methodological approach that makes it possible to reconstruct the rationality of planning using strategic documents. Theoretically, by associating the linguistic turn, embedded rationality, historical rationality, and assemblage theory, this research provides a consistent model of explanation of the development of planning rationality. Empirically, this framework was used to analyze six strategic plans of the city of Isfahan for the period 2001-2026. Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer two main questions:

What embedded rationality can be identified in each of the strategic documents of Isfahan Municipality?

How has the embedded rationality evolved across successive strategic documents, and what does this reveal about the historical rationality of urban planning in Isfahan?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theoretical foundations of this article are grounded in four main concepts: the linguistic turn, embedded rationality, historical rationality, and assemblage. The first concept acts as an ontological foundation for the research and theoretical base as well. Embedded and historical rationalities are two basic elements of the research apparatus that share a temporal base. The concept of assemblage is needed to integrate these two elements into one research tool. This section will define all these concepts, discuss their theoretical backgrounds and related methods, as well as address their flaws and limitations.

The Linguistic Turn

Planning documents have traditionally viewed language as a neutral tool for representing the reality of urban life. The linguistic turn is a serious challenge to this approach, as it argues that language is an active tool in shaping social reality rather than merely describing it (Gunder, 2011; Hovey, 2003; Rorty, 1992; Vuolteenaho et al., 2012). Across both analytic and continental traditions, this proposition takes different but complementary forms. Wittgenstein explains meaning as emerging through socially shared language games rather than through correspondence with objective reality (Wittgenstein, 2010). Foucault furthers this claim by arguing that knowledge is produced at the same time as power in discourse by defining what is possible to say and do (Foucault, 1995). Habermas further demonstrates that communication practices could become distorted through power relations within institutions (Habermas, 1984). Although the linguistic turn has been criticized for encouraging contextualism and relativism (Chakrabarty, 2008; Searle, 1995), these criticisms do not weaken the methodology's primary contribution. They rather underscore that texts should be understood as social constructs whose meaning is shaped by historical and institutional processes (Lindenfeld, 1996; Slembrouck, 2001; Wodak, 2011). As a result, textual analysis can move away from looking for clear statements towards uncovering the logics that produce meanings and hierarchies of importance to make possible the epistemology of analyzing planning rationality in strategic documents (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Chakrabarty, 2008; Reinfandt, 2020).

Embedded Rationality

Although the linguistic turn shows that urban strategic planning documents can construct reality, it does not explain the organizing logic that governs the selection of problems, the ordering of priorities, and the justification of interventions within them (Deetz, 2003; Vaara, 2010). Contrary to other texts, strategic plans are inherently tools of governance aimed at coordinating collective activities and legitimizing decisions taken by public authorities (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Vaara, 2010). Coherence exhibited in the plans thus implies the existence of a governing logic of planning whereby certain issues, concerns, and actions acquire greater legitimacy than others (N.

R. Torres, 2020; Zuziak, 2016).

This study adapts the concept to the analysis of urban strategic planning documents. Rather than assuming that planning decisions emerge from universal or context-free reasoning, embedded rationality emphasizes that rational judgment is shaped by historically, institutionally, and socially situated assumptions that define what is considered legitimate, desirable, or feasible within a particular planning context (Bridge, 1997; Dorstewitz & Kuruvilla, 2007; Townley, 2008). This has been extended in the literature on organizational decision-making, where it is argued that rationality resides in institutional processes, shared beliefs, and context rather than within individuals who make decisions (Davoudi, 2006; Schoemaker, 1993; West, 2017). Although embedded rationality has been criticized for its strong dependence on contextual conditions and its limited generalizability (McGuirk, 2022), these characteristics are not necessarily a weakness in the analysis of documents. On the contrary, because such documents are themselves products of specific institutional, political, and socio-cultural contexts, a context-sensitive understanding of rationality provides a useful basis for examining how planning priorities and policy choices are justified within each document (Bryson et al., 2009; DeMoor, 2019; McGuirk, 2022; Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes embedded rationality as an interpretive framework for reconstructing the planning rationality that structures individual strategic documents. This conceptualization provides the analytical foundation for the synchronic analysis developed in this study.

Historical Rationality

Reconstructing the planning rationality embedded within a single urban strategic document provides only a synchronic understanding of planning practice. Each plan is prepared at a specific moment in time, responding to a particular set of social, economic, and political conditions (Hutter & Wiechmann, 2022; Swanstrom, 1987; Wodak, 2011). Successive plans therefore do not replace one another entirely; they selectively preserve, modify, or abandon earlier planning assumptions and policy priorities (Valler & Phelps, 2018). Consequently, the planning rationality reconstructed within an individual document can only be fully understood when interpreted in relation to the rationalities embodied in preceding and subsequent plans (Filion, 2020; Hutter & Wiechmann, 2022; Kinkaid, 2020).

The concept of historical rationality addresses precisely this temporal dimension. Historically, this idea can be traced to Hegel's conception of history as an interconnected process rather than a sequence of isolated events. Subsequent interpretations emphasized that rationality itself is historically situated and evolves alongside changing institutional, material, and social conditions rather than remaining governed by timeless universal principles (Peña-Guzmán, 2020; Smith, 1992; White, 2014). Within the context of urban strategic planning, historical rationality means that each new plan is based on the previous ones (McGuirk, 2022). Consequently, the rationality of any individual document's planning cannot be fully understood without taking into account the planning rationalities of previous and later plans (Gunder, 2011; Huxley, 2013). It has been argued that such an approach might tend to apply an overly simplistic and linear narrative to complex and contradictory processes of history (Chakrabarty, 2008). Accordingly, this study employs historical rationality not as a deterministic theory of historical development but as an interpretive framework for comparing how planning rationalities persist, transform, or shift across successive strategic documents.

Assemblage

The rationality reconstructed from a strategic planning document cannot be understood solely from the presence of individual themes or priorities. What matters is how heterogeneous elements are brought together and related within a particular planning configuration. Planning

priorities, institutional assumptions, governance concerns, normative aspirations, and proposed interventions may acquire their meaning and significance through their relationships with one another rather than as isolated elements. Understanding planning rationality therefore requires attention not only to the elements contained in a plan but also to the configuration through which these elements are temporarily related (Briassoulis, 2017; Dorstewitz & Kuruvilla, 2007; Eizenberg, 2019; Rydin, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025). As developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and later refined by DeLanda (2016), assemblage refers to a whole that emerges from the specific arrangement and interaction of heterogeneous components (DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Applied to urban strategic planning documents, assemblage allows us to treat each plan as a temporary configuration of themes, priorities, and assumptions. At the same time, it recognizes that these configurations are not fixed; they can be reconfigured in subsequent plans as new elements enter the discourse or existing elements are redefined (McGuirk, 2022; Wang, 2019). Additionally, this approach may overlook the role of individual factors, such as creativity and agency, in shaping systems (Kinkaid, 2020; Sellar, 2009). Applied to planning documents, this perspective allows a strategic plan to be understood as a temporary configuration in which themes, priorities, assumptions, and orientations are brought into relation and collectively constitute a particular planning rationality (Bolan, 1999; van Houten, 1989). The relational character of an assemblage also makes its temporal dimension important. A configuration established in one planning period does not necessarily persist unchanged in subsequent plans. Elements may be retained while their meaning or position within the configuration changes; previously separate elements may become integrated; new elements may enter; and established elements may disappear (Briassoulis, 2017; Graham & Healey, 1999; Lejano, 2017). Assemblages can therefore undergo processes of reconfiguration as their components and relations change over time (DeLanda, 2016; McGuirk, 2022; Wang, 2019).

This relational and temporal logic provides the conceptual basis for integrating the two dimensions of planning rationality examined in this study. At a particular point in time, the rationality of a strategic plan can be understood through the configuration of its constituent themes and their relationships; this constitutes the synchronic dimension. However, because such configurations are temporary and subject to reconfiguration, the transformation of planning rationality can only be understood by examining how these configurations persist, transform, or are reorganized across successive plans; this constitutes the diachronic dimension. The two dimensions therefore do not represent separate forms of rationality, but two temporal perspectives on the same relational process of configuration and reconfiguration. In this study, assemblage consequently serves as the conceptual basis for connecting the synchronic reconstruction of rationality within individual strategic plans with the diachronic reconstruction of its transformation across the sequence of plans. In this study, assemblage functions as the integrative logic that justifies the necessity of reading the documents through both synchronic and diachronic dimensions within a single framework. In other words, each strategic plan is a temporary assemblage of themes, and the diachronic analysis reveals the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of these assemblages over time (Fig. 1).

Methodology

The current research paradigm of this study is qualitative and interpretivist. Such a paradigm is appropriate because the research problem concerns meaning, organizing principles, and historical relations rather than the measurement of variables. The study aims to reconstruct the planning rationality embedded in urban strategic planning documents and to explain how this rationality develops across successive planning periods. Following the linguistic turn and the in-

terpretive framework established above, the six strategic plans are treated as discursive artifacts that produce and institutionalize planning rationality. Thematic analysis is used not as a counting procedure but as an interpretive method aimed at reconstructing the embedded rationality of each document and the historical rationality emerging from their comparison. Figure 2 summarizes the integrated analytical framework adopted in this study.

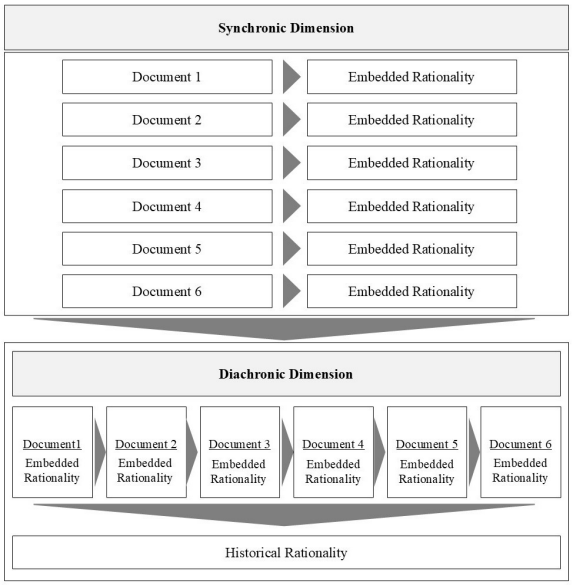


Figure 1: Assemblage between Embedded Rationality and Historical Rationality across the synchronic and diachronic dimensions.

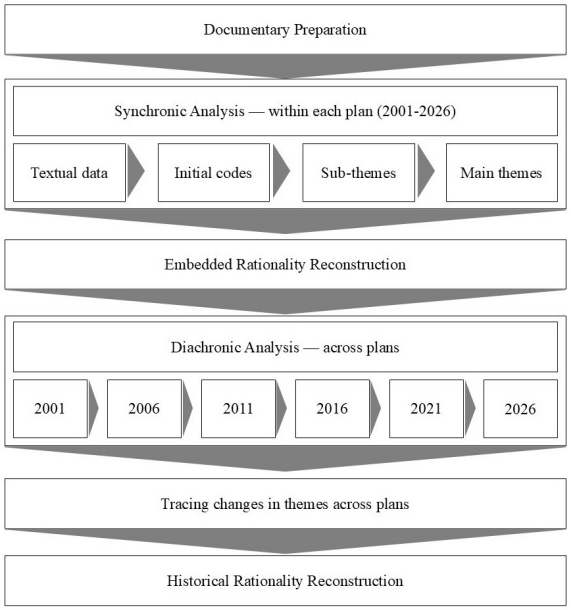


Figure 2: Integrated analytical framework for reconstructing Embedded and Historical planning Rationality

The empirical setting of this research is the city of Isfahan, Iran, one of the country's largest metropolitan municipalities with a long tradition of strategic urban planning. Since the early 2000s, the municipality has periodically produced comprehensive strategic plans to guide urban development. These documents constitute the documentary corpus of this study. Figure 3 presents the geographical location of the study area.



Figure 3: Location of the study: Isfahan, Iran

The empirical data consist of six strategic planning documents officially adopted by the Isfahan Municipality between 2001 and 2026: Isfahan 22 (2001), 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021, and 2026. All documents were extracted from the municipality's archives and constitute the complete series of strategic plans for the specified period. The naming of the first document reflects the length of its achievement horizon, while subsequent plans use the final year of their horizon. Although the six plans differ significantly in length and level of detail, they share the same genre as comprehensive strategic planning documents intended to guide urban development, and the differences in scale reflect the municipality's evolving planning capacity over time (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Profile of the six strategic planning documents analyzed in this study.

Strategic Plan	Pages	Legal Status	Applicated By	Authorship
Isfahan 2001 (22)	2	Adopted (1996)	Isfahan Municipality	Isfahan Municipality Deputy of Planning
Isfahan 2006	7	Adopted (2001)	Isfahan Municipality	Isfahan Municipality Deputy of Planning
Isfahan 2011	3	Adopted (2006)	Isfahan Municipality	Isfahan Municipality Deputy of Planning
Isfahan 2016	5	Adopted (2011)	Isfahan Municipality	Isfahan Municipality Deputy of Planning
Isfahan 2021	48	Adopted (2016)	Isfahan Municipality	Isfahan Municipality Deputy of Planning
Isfahan 2026	205	Adopted (2021)	Isfahan Municipality	University of Isfahan (commissioned by The Isfahan Municipality Deputy of Planning)

The six documents differ substantially in length and level of detail, ranging from two pages (Isfahan 22) to 205 pages (Isfahan 2026). This disparity could raise concerns about the comparability of coding outputs across documents. It is therefore important to clarify that this study does not rely on content counting or the quantitative distribution of themes as its primary analytical basis. Although coding frequencies are reported in selected tables for transparency, they serve an illustrative rather than an evidentiary function. The core analysis operates at the level of thematic configuration and trajectory. Two implications follow from this. First, the diachronic comparison was conducted at the level of final themes, not initial codes. The number of final themes per plan, ranging from 6 to 17, does not scale proportionally with document length. Longer documents produce more granular coding but do not necessarily yield proportionally more thematic categories. Second, the trajectory patterns identified in Table 5 are based on the presence or absence of a theme in each plan, not on how frequently it is coded. This binary approach further reduces the influence of document volume on the comparison. To ensure the validity of the diachronic comparison, the data analysis involved three interlinked phases aimed at rebuilding the planning rationale from the corpus of documents:

Stage 1: Preparation of the documentary corpus. All six documents were converted into machine-readable text and imported into Atlas.ti software. The full text of each document was included; no sections were excluded.

Stage 2: Synchronic and diachronic analyses. Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework was adapted and operationalized, as detailed in (Tab. 2). After the thematic structure of each document was determined through synchronic analysis, the six plans were chronologically ordered for comparison. The comparison was carried out at the level of final themes, exploring their continuation, transformation, emergence, disappearance, or fusion in successive plans. Themes were treated as comparable when they addressed the same underlying planning problem, even if their names or scopes changed over time. By following each theme across the six plans, four trajectory patterns were identified: a permanent core, a cumu-

lative layer, oscillating themes, and ephemeral themes. These four patterns together form the historical rationality reconstructed in this study. The initial coding was conducted by one author, independently reviewed by a second author, and the final thematic structure confirmed by a third author. Disagreements were resolved through discussion before finalization. The marked difference in the number of initial codes across plans, ranging from 8 for the 22's plan to 701 for the 2026's plan, does not reflect a change in coding procedure or analytical sensitivity; it reflects the gradual increase in volume, conceptual detail, and discursive differentiation of the documents themselves, while the research team maintained a consistent analytical level throughout.

Table 2: Operationalization of Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis in this study

Phase (Braun & Clarke)	Operationalization in the Current Study
Familiarization	The authors read all six strategic documents thoroughly to gain a thorough understanding of their content, structure, and overarching narratives.
Generating initial codes	Using Atlas.ti, the authors systematically extracted initial codes from textual statements. The total number of initial codes extracted for each plan was 8 (Isfahan 22), 95 (Isfahan 2006), 44 (Isfahan 2011), 105 (Isfahan 2016), 640 (Isfahan 2021), and 701 (Isfahan 2026).
Searching for themes	The authors collated conceptually similar initial codes into potential sub-themes and tentative thematic clusters.
Reviewing themes	The authors collaboratively reviewed the sub themes, merged overlapping ones, and consolidated them into higher order main themes.
Defining and naming themes	The authors gave each resulting overarching theme a precise definition and name. The total number of final main themes identified per plan was 6 (2001), 11 (2006), 10 (2011), 12 (2016), 17 (2021), and 16 (2026).
Producing the report	The authors synthesized the thematic structures into a unified matrix (see Findings) and used them as the foundation for the diachronic comparison.

To illustrate the progression from raw textual data to final themes, (Tab. 3) presents one representative trace from each plan, following the evolution of the environmental sustainability theme across the six documents.

Table 3: Representative coding examples tracing the evolution of a selected theme across six strategic plans

Plan	Initial Code	Sub-Theme	Main Theme
Isfahan 22 (2001)	"Developing green spaces and providing basic urban services."	Urban green spaces	Environment
Isfahan 2006	"Managing water resources, reducing pollution, and pursuing sustainable urban development."	Environmental management and pollution control	Safeguarding and enhancing the urban ecosystem
Isfahan 2011	"Increasing per capita green space, adopting sustainable management, and controlling environmental pollution."	-	Safeguarding and enhancing the urban ecosystem
Isfahan 2016	" Enhancing environmental quality, ensuring fair access to green spaces, and pursuing balanced urban development."	Improving urban environmental quality	Sustainable development of the city

Isfahan 2021	"Integrated management of water and soil resources, and moving toward a resilient city."	Ecological resilience and integrated resource management	Ecological advancement and sustainable development
Isfahan 2026	"Respecting the environment, managing energy and waste, and addressing pollution crises."	Health, environment, water, energy, waste, pollution, resilience	Sustainable development and livable city

Stage 3: Interpretation. The final stage synthesizes the synchronic and diachronic findings, focusing on the thematic structure of each plan, the trajectory of change across the sequence, and the relationship between the two levels. The interpretation of embedded rationality was based on the overall thematic configuration of each plan. Three considerations guided this interpretation: the breadth of urban concerns incorporated, the degree to which these concerns were differentiated or brought into a broader framework, and the relative emphasis on managerial, normative, social, aspirational, or implementation-oriented concerns. Rationality types were interpreted from the dominant configuration of themes within each plan, while recognizing that individual plans may contain elements associated with more than one rationality. This interpretation is grounded in the coding structure, as reported in (Tab. 4).

To ensure the quality of the analysis, four standard criteria were addressed. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a detailed record of all analytical steps, including the coding hierarchy, revision decisions, and the rationale for theme consolidation. Confirmability was achieved by grounding every theme directly in specific textual segments, leaving no section of the documents unexamined. Transferability was supported through a thorough description of the research context and procedures, including the codebook submitted as a separate supplementary file. Credibility was supported through the independent review process described in Stage 2.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized into two sections reflecting the two analytical levels of the study. The first section presents the synchronic findings, reconstructing the thematic structure and embedded rationality of each strategic plan individually. The second section presents the diachronic findings, tracing how thematic categories and their associated rationalities have persisted, transformed, or disappeared across the six planning documents.

Synchronic Findings: Thematic Structures of the Strategic Plans

Thematic analysis was conducted independently for each of the six strategic plans to identify the thematic structure of each document. The resulting themes were then organized by planning period to facilitate comparison across the six plans. Table 4 summarizes the number and composition of the extracted themes for each strategic plan and provides one representative example of the coding frequencies.

Table 4: Synchronic thematic structures of the six strategic plans: extracted themes and one example of coding frequencies.

Strategic plan	Extracted themes	Example (frequency)
Isfahan 22 (2001)	(1) Environmental; (2) Transportation and Traffic/Development; (3) The initiation of the crucial program; (4) City Branding; (5) Entertainment; (6) Failure to implement.	Environment (2)

Isfahan 2006	(1) Safeguarding and enhancing the urban ecosystem; (2) Transportation and traffic; (3) Program execution; (4) City Branding, Symbolism, and Utopia; (5) Cultural, sports, tourism and Entertainment; (6) Organization; (7) Enhancing urban environment; (8) Right to the city; (9) Advancement of urban infrastructure, amenities, and equipment; (10) The restoration and enhancement of the deteriorated infrastructure, alongside the revitalization of the city's historical character; (11) Islamic city.	Safeguarding and enhancing the urban ecosystem (4)
Isfahan 2011	(1) Safeguarding and enhancing the urban ecosystem; (2) Transportation and traffic; (3) Program execution; (4) City Branding; (5) Culture, Entertainment, participation and religion; (6) Identity promotion; (7) Organization; (8) Economic; (9) Justice, balance and equilibrium; (10) Islamic city.	Safeguarding and enhancing the urban ecosystem (3)
Isfahan 2016	(1) Sustainable development of the city; (2) Transportation and traffic; (3) Program structure; (4) City Branding; (5) Cultural; (6) Citizen-centered; (7) Organization and management; (8) Economic; (9) Advanced and scientific; (10) Safety; (11) Enhancing urban environment; (12) Development.	Sustainable development of the city (8)
Isfahan 2021	(1) Ecological advancement and sustainable development; (2) Transportation, traffic, access and circulation; (3) Program structure; (4) City Branding; (5) Culture and Identity; (6) Social and collaborative; (7) Organization and management; (8) Economic; (9) Technology, creativity and innovation; (10) Safety, comfort and security; (11) Housing needs; (12) Vital Public Realm; (13) Rule of law and granting of citizenship rights; (14) Efficiency and arrangement of urban infrastructure and amenities; (15) formal-spatial coherence; (16) Visual and perceptual organization; (17) Information Sharing.	Ecological advancement and sustainable development (6)
Isfahan 2026	(1) Sustainable development and livable city; (2) Transportation, traffic, access and circulation; (3) Program structure; (4) City Branding; (5) Social and participatory; (6) Educational and cultural; (7) Organizational structure; (8) Economic; (9) Smart city development; (10) Safety and security; (11) Housing; (12) Vital Public Realm; (13) Social justice and the right to the city; (14) Arrangement of urban infrastructure and amenities; (15) Preserving urban historical heritage; (16) Tourism promotion.	Sustainable development and livable city (7)

Isfahan 22 (2001): The earliest strategic document organizes its content around six themes: Environment; Transportation & Traffic/Development; The initiation of the crucial program; City Branding; Entertainment; and Failure to Implement. The thematic scope is narrower than in all subsequent plans, and the six categories are presented without an explicit overarching framework linking them to one another.

Isfahan 2006 :The 2006 plan comprises eleven themes: Safeguarding and enhancing the urban ecosystem; Transportation and traffic; Program execution; City Branding, Symbolism, and Utopia; Cultural, sports, tourism and Entertainment; Organization; Enhancing urban environment; Right to the city; Advancement of urban infrastructure, amenities, and equipment; The restoration and enhancement of the deteriorated infrastructure, alongside the revitalization of the city's historical character; and Islamic city. Compared with the 2001 plan, the thematic repertoire expands considerably and includes organizational, normative, and infrastructural categories that were previously absent.

Isfahan 2011: The 2011 plan includes ten themes: Safeguarding and enhancing the ur-

ban ecosystem; Transportation and traffic; Program execution; City Branding; Culture, Entertainment, participation and religion; Identity promotion; Organization; Economic; Justice, balance and equilibrium; and Islamic city. Relative to the 2006 plan, new thematic categories include Economic, Identity promotion, and Justice, balance and equilibrium, while the cultural domain incorporates participation and religion. The themes of the Islamic city, environmental protection, transportation, program execution, branding, and organization persist from the previous plan.

Isfahan 2016: The 2016 plan contains twelve themes: Sustainable development of the city; Transportation and traffic; Program structure; City Branding; Cultural; Citizen-centered; Organization and management; Economic; Advanced and scientific; Safety; Enhancing urban environment; and Development. New categories relative to 2011 include Citizen-centered, Advanced and scientific, Safety, Enhancing urban environment, and Development as a standalone theme. The term "Program execution" is replaced by "Program structure," and "Organization" becomes "Organization and management."

Isfahan 2021: The 2021 plan comprises seventeen themes: Ecological advancement and sustainable development; Transportation, traffic, access and circulation; Program structure; City Branding; Culture and Identity; Social and collaborative; Organization and management; Economic; Technology, creativity and innovation; Safety, comfort and security; Housing needs; Vital Public Realm; Rule of law and granting of citizenship rights; Efficiency and arrangement of urban infrastructure and amenities; Formal-spatial coherence; Visual and perceptual organization; and Information Sharing. This plan introduces the largest number of new thematic categories in the sequence, including Housing needs, Vital Public Realm, Formal-spatial coherence, Visual and perceptual organization, and Information Sharing.

Isfahan 2026: The 2026 plan includes sixteen themes. Sustainable development and livable city; Transportation, traffic, access and circulation; Program structure; City Branding; Social and participatory; Educational and cultural; Organizational structure; Economic; Smart city development; Safety and security; Housing; Vital Public Realm; Social justice and the right to the city; Arrangement of urban infrastructure and amenities; Preserving urban historical heritage; and Tourism promotion. Compared with the 2021 plan, the thematic structure is consolidated into a smaller number of broader categories. Smart city development replaces the earlier technology and creativity theme. Social justice and the right to the city integrates the previous rule of law and citizenship rights category. Tourism promotion appears for the first time in the sequence.

Diachronic Findings: Thematic Trajectories Across the Strategic Plans

The synchronic analysis reconstructs the internal logic inherent to each plan. In contrast, the diachronic approach examines how these planning rationalities evolve, tracing the emergence and disappearance of thematic categories across all six strategic documents. Historical rationality manifests through temporal patterns of movement, specifically in how planning concepts emerge, persist, or gradually fade throughout the documents' timeframe. To capture each theme's evolution across the six plans, four basic patterns are defined (Tab. 5):

Permanent Core – The theme appears in all six plans without ever missing one. It is always there.

Cumulative Layer – The theme is missing in the early plans, but then it shows up at some point and stays present through the final plan (2026). It never disappears after it appears.

Oscillating Themes – The theme is present, then disappears for at least one plan, and then comes back again later.

Ephemeral Themes – The theme appears only once, or it appears in two consecutive plans

and then never shows up again after that.

Table 5: Thematic trajectory matrix for the six strategic Plans of Isfahan (2001–2026).

pattern	Theme trajectory	Plans					
		22's (2001)	2026	2011	2016	2021	2026
Environmental sustainability	Permanent	•	•	•	•	•	•
Transportation and Mobility	Permanent	•	•	•	•	•	•
Program Structure and Implementation	Permanent	•	•	•	•	•	•
City Branding	Permanent	•	•	•	•	•	•
Culture and Cultural Life	Permanent	•	•	•	•	•	•
Organization and Management	Cumulative	–	•	•	•	•	•
Social Participation and Citizen-Centered Planning	Cumulative	–	–	•	•	•	•
Economic Development	Cumulative	–	–	•	•	•	•
Knowledge, Technology and Smart Development	Cumulative	–	–	–	•	•	•
Safety and Security	Cumulative	–	–	–	•	•	•
Housing	Cumulative	–	–	–	–	•	•
Urban Spatial Quality and Public Realm	Oscillating	–	•	–	•	•	•
Justice, Rights and Citizenship	Oscillating	–	•	•	–	•	•
Urban Infrastructure and Amenities	Oscillating	–	•	–	–	•	•
Historical Heritage	Oscillating	–	•	–	–	–	•
Failure to implement	Ephemeral	•	–	–	–	–	–
Islamic city	Ephemeral	–	•	•	–	–	–
Development	Ephemeral	–	–	–	•	–	–
Formal-spatial coherence	Ephemeral	–	–	–	–	•	–
Visual and perceptual organization	Ephemeral	–	–	–	–	•	–
Information Sharing	Ephemeral	–	–	–	–	•	–
Tourism promotion	Ephemeral	–	–	–	–	–	•

Filled circles (•) indicate the presence of a thematic category in the corresponding plan; dashes (–) indicate its absence.

The Permanent Core Pattern (Persistent Themes): This category encompasses five recurring themes: Environmental Sustainability, Transportation and Mobility, Program Structure and Implementation, City Branding, and Culture and Cultural Life. Together, they form the stable backbone of Isfahan's planning rationality. Yet their continuous presence should not be mistaken for conceptual rigidity. As the synchronic analysis shows, the meanings embedded in these themes change over time. Environmental concerns, for instance, shift from a narrow focus on ecological protection toward the broader ideal of a livable city; transportation evolves

from traffic management into smart mobility and enhanced accessibility. The persistent core therefore embodies continuity within change, a durable set of planning priorities whose operational content is perpetually subject to reinterpretation and renegotiation.

The Cumulative Layer Pattern (Emergent and Sustained Themes): This pattern captures six themes including, Organization and Management, Social Participation and Citizen-Centered Planning, Economic Development, Knowledge, Technology and Smart Development, Safety and Security, and Housing. These themes constitute a cumulative layer of planning rationality. Their trajectory reflects the gradual expansion of strategic planning. As the planning system matured, new policy domains were progressively incorporated and thereafter retained. This pattern is particularly significant because it demonstrates that Isfahan's planning rationality does not merely substitute old priorities with new ones. Rather, it accumulates new commitments while retaining established ones, producing an increasingly complex and layered rationality.

Oscillating Themes Pattern (Intermittent Priorities): Four themes exhibit this pattern, including Urban Spatial Quality and Public Realm, Justice, Rights and Citizenship, Urban Infrastructure and Amenities, and Historical Heritage. These themes represent intermittent priorities, concerns that emerge onto the planning agenda, fall into abeyance, and subsequently return. The oscillation indicates that these themes are sensitive to shifting political, economic, or social contexts. For instance, Historical Heritage appears in 2006, disappears from 2011 through 2021, and reappears only in 2026. Such trajectories reveal that planning rationality is shaped not only by cumulative institutional learning but also by periodic re-prioritization in response to external pressures. The return of a previously absent theme does not necessarily signal the resumption of an identical concern. Rather, it may reflect a reinterpretation of an older issue within a new local government.

Ephemeral Themes Pattern (Transient and Discontinued Agendas): Emergence-with-removal includes themes that appear in two consecutive plans and then vanish. The clearest example is the Islamic City, which appears in 2006 and 2011 but is absent from all subsequent plans. Its trajectory shows a temporary ideological orientation that was later displaced by more pragmatic, managerial concerns. Single occurrence includes themes that appear in only one plan. Examples include Failure to Implement (2001), Development (2016), Formal-Spatial Coherence (2021), Visual and Perceptual Organization (2021), Information Sharing (2021), and Tourism Promotion (2026). Single-occurrence themes represent experimental priorities, responses to momentary conditions, or tentative insertions that failed to become established within the planning system. The ephemeral patterns reveal the limits of durability within the planning rationality. Not every theme that enters the planning agenda becomes embedded in subsequent plans. The selective abandonment of certain themes demonstrates that planning rationality operates through processes of filtering and selective retention, not through accumulation alone.

Building on these findings, the interpretation proceeds at three levels. The first level reconstructs the embedded rationality of each strategic plan from its thematic configuration. The second level traces the historical rationality that emerges across the sequence through four trajectory patterns. The third level reads both through assemblage logic, situating them within the broader institutional context of national development frameworks, municipal councils, and mayoral tenures.

Embedded rationality: From thematic configuration to planning logic

The synchronic analysis shows that strategic plans differ not only in which themes they contain, but in how those themes are arranged and related to one another. This arrangement is what

is meant by configuration: the particular way in which themes are prioritized, grouped, and connected within a document. Themes acquire meaning through these relationships rather than in isolation. The themes identified in each plan can therefore be read as expressions of an embedded planning rationality: a contextually situated way of defining what matters, what should be prioritized, and how different concerns are brought together within a strategic document.

Isfahan 22 (2001) presents the least differentiated configuration. Its themes remain largely organized as separate urban concerns, with limited evidence of an overarching relationship among them. This coexistence of environmental concerns, transportation, branding, entertainment, and implementation failure suggests an emergent managerial orientation in which strategic planning was still closely associated with identifying and organizing municipal concerns. The embedded rationality is consequently better understood as incipient and problem-oriented.

The 2006 plan represents a more explicit managerial configuration. Organizational concerns, program execution, infrastructure, environmental management, transportation, and branding are brought into a broader municipal framework, while normative themes such as the right to the city and the Islamic city enter the planning vocabulary. Planning increasingly connects urban development to organizational capacity and municipal action. The embedded rationality can therefore be interpreted as predominantly managerial-administrative, while already incorporating normative elements.

By 2011, the thematic configuration had become more normatively differentiated. Justice and equilibrium, identity, participation, religion, culture, and the Islamic city appear alongside persistent organizational, economic, environmental, and transportation concerns. The scope of what constituted a legitimate planning concern had expanded beyond municipal management and service provision. The embedded rationality of this period can therefore be interpreted as normative and socially expansive, in which questions of identity, equity, and collective values became more explicitly incorporated into strategic planning.

The 2016 plan reorganizes this configuration around a more aspirational conception of urban development. Citizen-centered planning, scientific advancement, safety, sustainable development, and urban environmental enhancement appear alongside economic and organizational concerns. The document broadens the imagined object of planning from municipal administration toward the future condition of the city. The embedded rationality is therefore characterized by an increasingly holistic and vision-oriented orientation.

The 2021 plan represents the highest degree of thematic differentiation in the sequence. Its configuration indicates a planning rationality in which urban development is treated as a multidimensional field, articulated through a wide range of distinct planning areas within a common strategic framework.

The 2026 plan introduces a reorganized configuration. The number of themes decreases only marginally, from seventeen to sixteen, yet the internal arrangement of categories shifts in notable ways. Previously separate concerns are regrouped under broader headings: Social and collaborative and Culture and Identity are carried forward as two categories (Social and participatory; Educational and cultural); Technology, creativity and innovation are recast as Smart city development; and Rule of law and granting of citizenship rights is subsumed within social justice and the right to the city. At the same time, preserving urban historical heritage reappears after an absence of three consecutive planning periods, and Tourism promotion enters the planning agenda for the first time. The embedded rationality of this document is therefore characterized by a consolidative logic that seeks to reorganize an accumulated planning agenda into categories more readily connected to implementation.

Read together, these six accounts show that the rationality of a plan does not depend on how many themes it contains. What matters is how those themes are arranged and how they relate to one another. When the six plans are read as a historical sequence, it becomes clear that this configuration changes over time, even when the same themes remain present.

Historical Rationality: From Thematic Trajectories to Selective Continuity

The diachronic findings point to a historical rationality that is neither linear nor purely cumulative. Across the six documents, the planning discourse is anchored by a stable core of five enduring commitments: environment, mobility, program structure, city branding, and cultural life. These themes persist, but their meanings gradually change. Environmental protection broadens into sustainable development and eventually into the ideal of a livable city. Transportation evolves from traffic management into integrated mobility and accessibility. Program structure shifts from execution toward implementation capacity. City branding moves from symbolism and utopian imagery toward a more pragmatic concern with competitive identity. Cultural life expands from entertainment toward educational and cultural value. The permanent core, therefore, is not a frozen set of commitments but a durable axis around which reinterpretation continuously occurs.

Around this core, a cumulative layer of six themes (social participation, organization and management, economy, technology, safety, and housing) shows that the planning system progressively absorbed new policy domains and retained them. These themes entered the agenda at different moments and, once established, never disappeared. Their accumulation reflects the institutional maturation of strategic planning. The later documents operate on a broader terrain than the earlier ones, carrying forward twenty-five years of accumulated concerns.

Alongside these, a set of oscillating themes (public realm, justice and rights, infrastructure, and heritage) reveals that certain priorities are periodically renegotiated. They disappear from the agenda and later return, often in modified form. Their oscillation suggests that planning rationality is sensitive not only to internal institutional logic but also to shifting political, social, and economic conditions. The return of historical heritage in 2026, after an absence spanning three consecutive plans, reflects a reinterpretation of an older priority within a new governance context. Oscillation is therefore a mechanism of adaptive re-prioritization.

A range of ephemeral themes (appearing only once or in two consecutive plans before disappearing) shows that the planning system also filters and abandons ideas that fail to become institutionalized. The Islamic City, for instance, appears in 2006 and 2011 but then vanishes, suggesting a temporary ideological orientation displaced by more pragmatic concerns. Similarly, a cluster of technical-spatial themes in 2021 (formal-spatial coherence, visual and perceptual organization, and information sharing) fails to persist into 2026, indicating an experimental agenda that did not gain traction. These episodes reveal the selective nature of planning rationality. The planning system acts as a filter, retaining some concerns while allowing others to fade.

Read together, these four patterns compose a historical rationality best understood as a selective, layered, and adaptive continuity. It preserves a stable core, accumulates new commitments, periodically renegotiates priorities, and filters out what fails to become established. Historical rationality, in this reading, is not a fixed attribute of the planning system but an ongoing process of structured reconfiguration. Its analytical value lies in shifting the unit of interpretation from the presence or absence of individual themes to the trajectories through which planning priorities are retained, accumulated, reinterpreted, or abandoned. This makes it possible to distinguish apparent continuity from substantive continuity, and thematic change from changes

in the underlying rationality of planning. This trajectory resonates with broader observations in the planning literature, while differing in its specific configuration. Planning systems have often been described as moving from administratively oriented approaches toward more integrated, participatory, and governance-oriented forms of planning, although such trajectories are rarely linear (Healey, 1996, 2004; Hutter & Wiechmann, 2022; Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013). The Isfahan sequence similarly shows an expansion from an incipient problem-oriented configuration toward more normative, socially expansive, and differentiated forms of planning. However, the later consolidation of themes in the 2026 plan suggests that thematic expansion does not continue indefinitely; accumulated priorities may instead be reorganized toward implementation. The Isfahan case therefore does not represent a universal stage model of planning evolution. Rather, it illustrates how broader tendencies identified in planning scholarship may be selectively combined, interrupted, or reconfigured within a particular institutional and political setting (Filion, 2020; Swanstrom, 1987).

Assembling Rationalities: Territorial Dynamics and Institutional Context

Embedded and historical rationalities reconstructed in the previous sections become analytically meaningful when read through the movements of territorialization, reterritorialization, and deterritorialization. Each strategic plan is a temporary assemblage of themes. Territorialization occurs when a theme enters the assemblage for the first time. Reterritorialization occurs when an already present theme is reconfigured in a subsequent plan, whether through a shift in meaning, a change in name, or a new position within the arrangement. Deterritorialization occurs when a theme disappears from the assemblage, either temporarily or permanently. These movements are visible across the four trajectory patterns. The permanent core is territorialized in the first plan and then repeatedly reterritorialized without ever undergoing deterritorialization. Environmental protection, for example, is territorialized in 2001 as a narrow ecological concern, reterritorialized in 2016 as sustainable development, and reterritorialized again in 2026 as part of a livable city ideal. The cumulative layer is territorialized at a later point and thereafter remains, undergoing subsequent reterritorializations without deterritorialization. Oscillating themes undergo the full cycle: territorialization, deterritorialization, and later reterritorialization under new conditions. Justice is territorialized in 2011, deterritorialized in 2016, reterritorialized in 2021 as "rule of law and citizenship rights," and reterritorialized again in 2026 as "social justice and the right to the city." Ephemeral themes are territorialized at one moment and then deterritorialized without subsequent reterritorialization. Islamic City, for example, is territorialized in 2006, persists into 2011, and then undergoes permanent deterritorialization.

This rhythm of configuration, disappearance, and reconfiguration becomes more legible when read within a broader institutional setting. One such setting is the national developmental framework. The national five-year development plans established a discursive horizon for urban planning across the study period. The Third Development Plan (2000–2004) introduced integrated urban management and local capacity-building, a vocabulary that the 2006 plan selectively incorporated. The Fourth Development Plan (2005–2009) reinforced sustainable development and spatial planning, providing a normative lexicon that resonated with the 2011 plan's emphasis on identity and justice. The Fifth Development Plan (2010–2015) emphasized urban identity, resilience, and public participation, elements selectively appropriated in the 2016 plan's aspirational rationality. The Sixth Development Plan (2016–2021) shifted focus toward efficiency, transparency, and knowledge-based development, a horizon that the 2021 plan expanded upon. Because the Seventh Development Plan was delayed, the logic of the Sixth Plan

persisted into the period in which the 2026 plan was prepared. Alongside these national plans, the statutory basis for the strategic urban plans analyzed here is rooted in Article 15 of the Urban Renewal and Development Law (1968), which mandates the preparation of five-year strategic operational plans for municipalities, further codified through the Executive Directive of 2013. In each case, the local plans did not simply mirror national policy; they selectively appropriated elements of the national horizon according to municipal priorities and governance conditions.

Another, perhaps more immediate, setting is the municipal council and mayoral tenure. The 2001 plan predates the first council period examined here and was prepared under the administrative conditions of the late 1990s. The first council (1999–2003) and the mayoral tenure of Mohammad Ali Javadi (1997–2003) coincided with the preparation of the 2006 plan, which exhibits a more explicit managerial-administrative orientation, suggesting that the planning agenda matured from identifying concerns toward connecting urban development to organizational capacity. The second council (2003–2006) coincided with the early stages of the 2011 plan, while the prolonged tenure of Morteza Saghaeian Nejad (2003–2015) spanned the preparation of both the 2011 and 2016 plans. The third council (2006–2013), which included both conservative and reformist figures, temporally aligns with the 2016 plan's normative and aspirational expansion. Under this extended administrative continuity, the 2011 plan's normative and socially expansive orientation gradually matured into the 2016 plan's holistic and vision-oriented rationality, suggesting that sustained mayoral leadership allowed the planning agenda to evolve from identity and justice toward aspirational urban development. The fourth council (2013–2017) and the brief tenure of Mehdi Jamalinejad (2015–2016) coincided with the preparation of the 2021 plan, marking a transitional period in which the planning agenda became differentiated across multiple dimensions. The fifth council (2017–2021) and the tenure of Ghodratollah Norouzi (2016–2021) coincided with the preparation of the 2026 plan, whose consolidative logic reflects an effort to reorganize the accumulated planning agenda into a more implementation-oriented framework.

These correspondences are most visible in the oscillating and ephemeral categories. Political change and administrative cycles appear to create conditions in which certain themes become more likely to enter the assemblage, while others become less likely to persist. This dynamic, however, does not unravel the historical rationality of the sequence. The permanent core remains largely unaffected by these fluctuations, undergoing reterritorialization rather than deterritorialization. The cumulative layer continues to grow through territorialization. The interplay between institutional shifts and the planning assemblage thus illustrates how a selective, layered, and adaptive continuity is maintained: the institutional context conditions the timing and direction of thematic change, while the assemblage retains a stable core that persists across administrative and political boundaries. From this perspective, rationalities form a moving arrangement in which a stable center coexists with an active periphery where themes are continually territorialized, reterritorialized, deterritorialized, or abandoned. Council periods and mayoral tenures do not determine this movement, but they condition its timing and direction. Assemblage logic thus provides an integrative frame that makes the interaction between embedded rationality and institutional context analytically visible. Figure 4 visualizes the planning assemblage as a diagram. The six columns correspond to the six strategic plans, each labeled with its embedded rationality. The flows represent thematic trajectories, colored by pattern: green for the permanent core, blue for the cumulative layer, brown for oscillating themes, and purple for ephemeral themes. The diagram renders visible the processes of territorialization, where new flows emerge; deterritorialization, where flows terminate; and

reterritorialization, where existing flows cross from one rationality to another. The institutional context is incorporated as an interpretive layer that informs the reading of the diagram, particularly the moments at which oscillating and ephemeral themes attach or detach

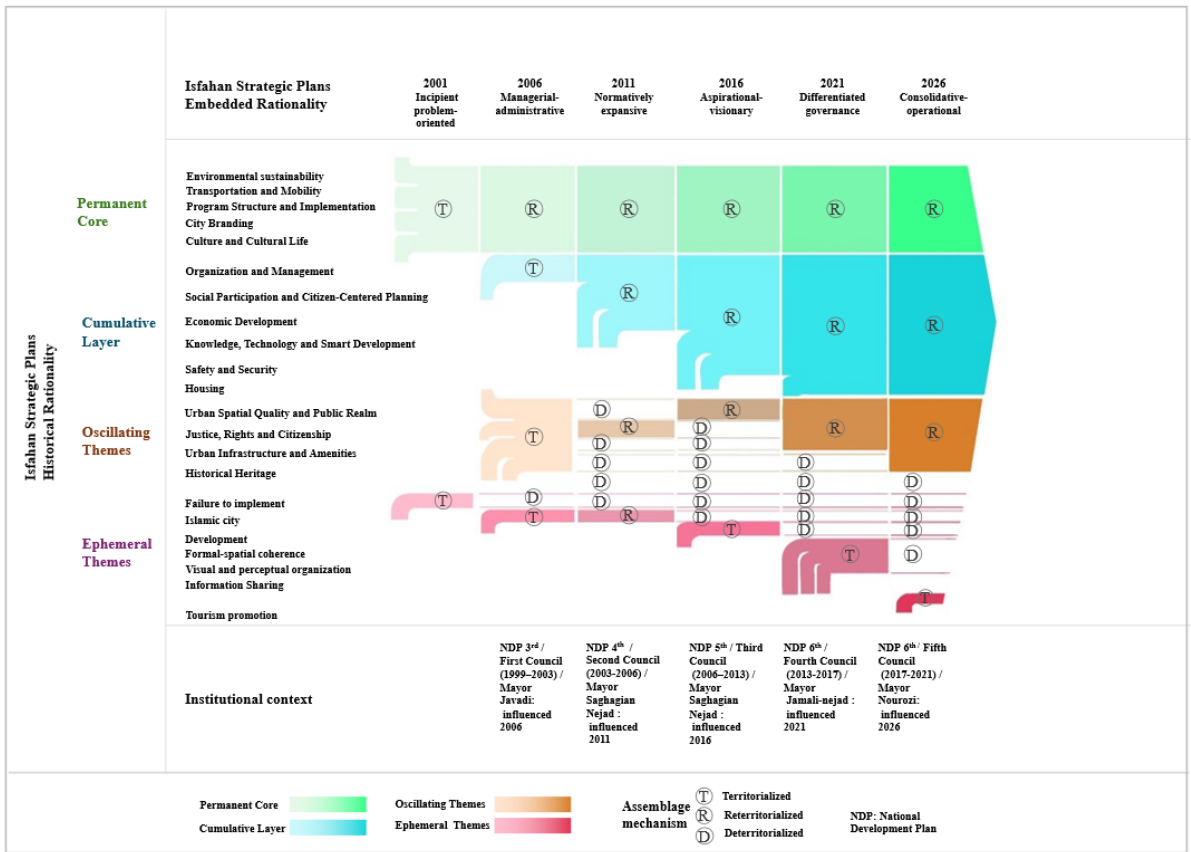


Figure 4: The Assemblage of Embedded and Historical Rationalities and Institutional Influences in Isfahan's Strategic Plans.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to reconstruct the planning rationality embedded in the strategic documents of Isfahan Municipality and to trace how that rationality has evolved across successive planning periods. Two questions guided the inquiry. The first asked what embedded rationality could be identified in each strategic document. The second asked how these rationalities have evolved over time and what these reveal about the historical rationality of urban planning in Isfahan. The synchronic analysis answered the first question by showing that each strategic plan is organized around a distinct planning logic. The earliest document, Isfahan 22, operated through an incipient problem-oriented rationality that listed urban concerns without integrating them. The 2006 plan shifted toward a managerial-administrative rationality that framed urban development as a matter of organizational capacity and municipal action. The 2011 plan expanded this logic normatively, incorporating justice, identity, participation, and religious values into the planning agenda. The 2016 plan adopted an aspirational-visionary rationality oriented toward a future city defined by scientific advancement, citizen-centeredness, and sustainability. The 2021 plan reached the highest level of thematic

differentiation, embodying a governance rationality that treated urban development as a plurality of interconnected domains. The 2026 plan, finally, introduced a consolidative-operational rationality that reorganized this differentiated agenda into broader categories more readily connected to implementation. The diachronic analysis answered the second question by revealing that these embedded rationalities do not simply replace one another. Across the six documents, four trajectory patterns structure the historical evolution of planning rationality. A permanent core of five themes (environment, mobility, program structure, city branding, and cultural life) has persisted across all plans, undergoing continuous reterritorialization without ever being deterritorialized. A cumulative layer of six themes has been progressively incorporated into the planning assemblage and thereafter retained, demonstrating that the planning system expands its commitments without abandoning earlier ones. A set of oscillating themes has periodically detached from and reattached to the assemblage, revealing the sensitivity of planning rationality to shifting institutional and political conditions. Finally, a range of ephemeral themes has appeared and disappeared without becoming institutionalized, showing that the planning system operates through selective retention as much as through accumulation. Read through assemblage logic, these findings suggest that planning rationality in Isfahan is neither a fixed structure nor a linear progression. It is a moving arrangement in which a stable center coexists with an active periphery where themes are continually territorialized, reterritorialized, deterritorialized, or abandoned. The institutional context (including national development plans, the statutory framework for strategic urban planning, municipal council periods, and mayoral tenures) does not determine this movement, but it conditions its timing and direction. These institutional shifts exert their clearest influence on the oscillating and ephemeral categories, while the permanent core remains largely intact. The contribution of this study is threefold. Methodologically, it demonstrates that the combination of synchronic and diachronic thematic analysis within a single assemblage framework makes it possible to move beyond descriptive accounts of thematic change and toward the reconstruction of planning rationality. Theoretically, it shows that embedded rationality, historical rationality, and assemblage theory can be integrated into a coherent interpretive model for understanding how planning logics are configured and reconfigured over time. Empirically, it provides a documented account of how one Iranian metropolitan municipality has selectively preserved, accumulated, renegotiated, and abandoned planning priorities across a twenty-five-year period. The study also has limitations. It relies exclusively on the textual content of strategic plans and does not incorporate interviews with planners, council members, or municipal officials. The relationship between institutional context and planning priorities is therefore interpreted as conditioning rather than as direct causation. All six plans were prepared under the authority of the Isfahan Municipality Deputy of Planning. While the first five plans were produced internally by the Deputy, the 2026 plan was commissioned to the University of Isfahan. The potential influence of this shift in authorship was not systematically examined. The study also focuses on a single city, which limits the generalizability of its empirical findings. The interpretive framework developed here is intended to be applicable to other contexts where sequential series of planning documents are available. Future research could extend this work in several directions. Comparative studies across multiple Iranian cities would help determine whether the trajectory patterns identified in Isfahan reflect broader national trends or city-specific dynamics. The inclusion of interviews and archival materials would deepen the institutional analysis of council and mayoral influence. Finally, the application of the same assemblage framework to other types of planning documents, such as sectoral plans, budget documents, or imple-

mentation reports, would test the robustness of the approach beyond strategic plans. Beyond these extensions, the findings carry a broader implication. Strategic plans should be evaluated not only by what they contain at a particular moment, but also by what they retain, transform, abandon, and carry forward across time. It is in this temporal movement that the rationality of planning becomes visible, and it is through this movement that planning either matures into a coherent governance instrument or fragments into disconnected rhetoric.

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