

# CASE STUDY 3

## STICKY, STINKY, SQUALID: THE TOXIC LEACHATE OF HOUSEHOLDS' WASTE IN AN AREA OF URBAN DECAY IN TEHRAN (IRAN)

*Leila Papoli-Yazdi*

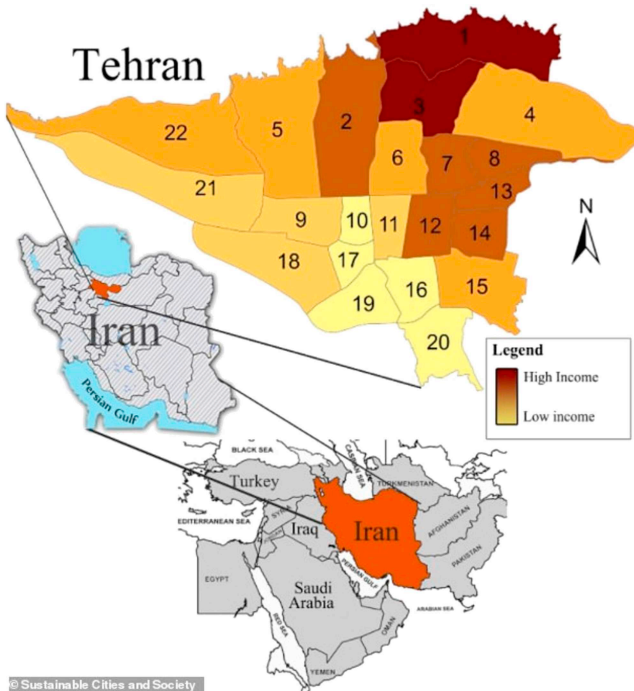
### **Areas of Urban Decay in a Crowded City: Tehran**

Tehran is a megapolis with over 8.5 million population. It is estimated that nearly 20% of the city population lives in subordinated areas. The city itself is divided into 22 districts (Figure 1). On the northern side of the city, where districts 1, 2 and 3 are located, the well-off people inhabit, while the southern side is occupied by low-income statuses.

In 2018, my colleagues and I conducted a garbology project in district 17 (Papoli-Yazdi, 2021). This place is known to be an area where the impoverished and working classes live. The western zones of the district are chronologically the oldest and date back at least 100 years ago. The newer buildings have been built adjacent to the older buildings without any premeditated urban plan. The Qanat (ancient water channels) still existed beneath the newer buildings. These channels cause much trouble for the inhabitants. Mice dig holes under the houses, which make the foundation of the houses so weak that the inhabitants live with the constant fear of their residence areas collapsing.

An overlooked yet severe problem of people living in the area is their challenges with daily garbage. The inhabitants dispose of their everyday garbage bags in the containers set by the municipality on every avenue. The garbage containers are made of metal and have four wheels set to stand on metal or tile-made frames. In the area of urban decay, each avenue has two narrow water channels on both sides on which the garbage container is usually set. These containers would be full before noontime usually and are stinky, worsening the hygiene of the district.

The interviews with the employees of the municipality revealed that the main problem is a long-term conflict between different sections of the government, which are responsible for the renovation of the historical urban decay. This conflict has led to disastrous waste management in places labelled “heritage.”



**FIGURE 1** Tehran and Iran and income levels in districts of Tehran (Daily Mail: [shorturl.at/kulJL](http://shorturl.at/kulJL)).

### Waste Management in Historical Areas of Urban Decay

Some alleys in district 17 are so narrow that two people cannot walk in the alley simultaneously (Figure 2). This has made the waste management service very complicated. At the same time, the municipality ignores the impoverished areas and prefers to focus on more crowded streets, shopping malls, and streets that wealthier people occupy.

Some businesses, like auto shops, have been transferred to modest areas since the well-off people do not desire to have them in their neighbourhoods. Waste such as pieces of car engines and gasoline are discarded in the same containers where people dispose of their daily garbage. The liquid leaking from the wet waste, rain, and sometimes engine oil combines with the accumulation of daily garbage and forms layers of toxic leachate. It sticks to the wheels of the containers and runs in the water channels. When it is warm, the stench overpowers. It is of note that some impoverished inhabitants search in the containers to collect garbage and sell them (Figure 3). Digging into the containers, they tear up the garbage bags, which causes their bodies to be contaminated and the container to get more polluted.

Our studies determined that low-income inhabitants tend to segregate their discarded items more than the municipality or well-off citizens assumed. The reason



**FIGURE 2** Narrow alleys in district 17 (Photo by Garbology project of Tehran).



**FIGURE 3** A citizen searching a garbage container for still-usable objects (Photo by Garbology project of Tehran).

is that they usually sell plastic, glass, and metal objects to garbage collectors. On the other hand, low-income households produce, on average less than 1:3 of the garbage made by well-off households. It is why I believe that the root of the problem is in how the waste management system organizes its services in modest areas of urban decay. The difference between the “historical districts” located on the northern side of the city and the areas of urban decay on the southern side is that the northern ones obtain annual and occasional renovation and waste management services. One reason for this distinction might be that the city’s southern side is no tourist attraction. All of these indicate the dual policy of MCHHT about heritage which changes based on the poverty or richness of the owners of the historic buildings or districts.

### Sticky, Stinky, and ... Heritage

Two major sections of the government are responsible for reconstructing and preserving urban decay in Iran. The first is the “Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism (MCHHT),” and the second is the municipalities’ “Reconstruction and development of areas of urban decay” sections. The conflict arises when urban decay is labelled “heritage” by MCHHT while people still live in that area. Being “heritage” means that the neighbourhood’s buildings would be located under the Antiquities law (see Falahfar, 2015). Based on the law, it is illegal to reconstruct a “heritage” monument or area of urban decay, and only minor repairs have been anticipated to be performed in such areas.

The case of district 17 shows that historical areas need a particular plan for waste management. Otherwise, the accumulation of daily garbage can potentially create toxicity in the area. Nevertheless, the organized discrimination between the “northern heritages” and “southern heritage” indicates that the government focuses on particular areas and ignores other parts of the city even if they are also heritage. In other words, the stinky squalid areas of urban decay in district 17 result from a policy in Iran: all heritages are equal, but some heritages are more equal!

### References

- Falahfar, Saeed. 2015. *1309: Ghanoon-e hefz-e athar-e melli va atiqat [1931: The laws of Antiquities and preservation]*. Tehran: Avineh (in Persian).
- Papoli-Yazdi, Leila. 2021. The archaeology of a marginal neighborhood in Tehran, Iran: garbage, class, and identity. *World Archaeology*, 53(3): 547–562.