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SUSTAINABLE URBAN PLANNING APPROACHES IN THE POST-CONFLICT TERRITORIES OF THE KARABAKH ECONOMIC REGION

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Sustainability has become a key idea in modern global development, affecting how we design cities, make energy policy, and grow the economy. Post-conflict conditions significantly intensify the importance of sustainable urban planning, as rebuilding efforts are required to restore not only urban infrastructure but also social cohesion, environmental balance, and economic vitality. The Karabakh economic region of Azerbaijan offers a compelling example of such large-scale post-conflict reconstruction. This paper explores sustainable urban planning approaches applied in post-conflict cities of the Karabakh economic region, with a focus on energy efficiency, environmental resilience, functional zoning, and social inclusivity. Long periods of occupation led to the near-total destruction of urban landscapes and infrastructure. The findings demonstrate that sustainable urban planning is not only a technical solution but also a strategic instrument for restoring urban identity, enhancing resilience, and ensuring balanced development in post-conflict territories.

Keywords: sustainability, urbanization, social impact, urban assessment, effective governance.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability has become central to contemporary global development, influencing methods for socioeconomic growth, energy policy, and urban planning. As cities continue to expand and face increasing environmental pressures, sustainable urban planning has emerged as a critical framework for creating resilient, inclusive, and resource-efficient urban environments. This importance becomes even more pronounced in post-conflict contexts, where the reconstruction process must address not only the physical restoration of urban fabric but also the social, environmental, and economic rehabilitation of affected territories.

Post-conflict urban environments are often characterized by extensive destruction of housing, infrastructure, and public spaces, alongside long-term population displacement and weakened local economies. In such settings, conventional reconstruction strategies focused solely on physical rebuilding are insufficient. Instead, integrated planning approaches that combine energy efficiency, environmental resilience, functional zoning, and social inclusivity are required to ensure long-term sustainability and stability [15, p. 141-145]. Urban planning in post-conflict regions therefore plays a dual role: responding to urgent recovery needs while simultaneously shaping future-oriented development trajectories. The Karabakh economic region of Azerbaijan represents a distinctive and large-scale example of post-conflict urban regeneration. Decades of occupation resulted in the near-total destruction of cities, settlements, and infrastructure, leaving behind vast areas of abandoned and degraded urban land. Following the restoration of territorial integrity, the reconstruction of Karabakh has been positioned as a strategic national priority, guided by the principles of sustainable development and the concept of creating “green” and “smart” cities and villages. This approach aims to transform the region into a model of sustainable post-conflict development through the integration of renewable energy systems, energy-efficient buildings, environmentally sensitive planning, and inclusive urban environments.



Against this background, this paper explores sustainable urban planning approaches applied in the post-conflict cities of the Karabakh economic region. Particular attention is given to strategies related to energy efficiency, environmental resilience, functional zoning, and social inclusivity within newly developed master plans. The study argues that sustainable urban planning in the Karabakh economic region is not merely a technical response to destruction but a strategic instrument for restoring urban identity, strengthening resilience, and ensuring balanced and long-term development in post-conflict territories.

MAIN PART

Theoretical Foundations of Sustainable Urban Planning

The concept of sustainable development emerged in the second half of the 20th century as a response to the growing environmental, social, and economic challenges caused by accelerated industrialization and urbanization. One of the key stages in the development of this concept was the publication of the report "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development, which defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the opportunities of future generations [9, p. 43]. This definition became the theoretical basis for the further development of the concept of sustainability in various fields, including urban planning.

In the context of urban planning, sustainable development is viewed as the integration of three interrelated dimensions: environmental, social, and economic [15, p. 141–145]. Environmental sustainability aims to reduce the negative impact of the urban environment on natural ecosystems, rationally manage land and energy resources, and implement energy-efficient and climate-adaptive solutions [7, p. 1–13]. Social sustainability involves creating an inclusive urban environment, ensuring equal access to housing, infrastructure, and public spaces, and strengthening social cohesion and quality of life [8, p. 430–435]. Economic sustainability is associated with the creation of a viable urban economy, supporting employment, and the efficient use of urban space [6, p. 45–60].

The theoretical foundations of sustainable urban development are based on a number of key principles, including compact development, functional mix, the prioritization of public transportation and pedestrian connections, and the energy efficiency of buildings and utility systems [6, p. 45–60]. These principles aim to reduce spatial fragmentation of cities, alleviate traffic congestion, and create a balanced urban structure. The development of "green infrastructure," including parks, green corridors, and nature-based solutions that contribute to improving environmental conditions and adapting cities to climate change, also plays an important role [15, p. 141–145]. Modern scientific approaches emphasize that sustainable urban development is not limited solely to technical and planning solutions. It requires integrated institutional management, an interdisciplinary approach, and the active participation of local communities in planning and decision-making processes [14, p. 61–68]. Within this concept, the city is viewed not only as a physical structure but also as a socio-cultural system, the development of which should be oriented toward long-term sustainability, adaptability, and the preservation of the identity of the urban environment. Thus, the theoretical foundations of sustainable urban development form the conceptual basis for planning and transforming cities in various contexts, including post-conflict areas. The principles of sustainability allow us to consider urban planning as a strategic tool aimed at creating balanced, sustainable, and viable urban systems in the long term [9, p. 43; 15, p. 141–152].

Problems of Reconstruction and Resilience in Post-Conflict Cities

Rebuilding post-conflict cities is a complex and multi-layered process that extends far beyond the physical restoration of destroyed buildings and infrastructure. Modern scientific approaches view reconstruction as a comprehensive transformation of the urban system, encompassing the social reintegration of the population, the restoration of economic activity, environmental rehabilitation, and the building of institutional resilience [15, p. 141–145]. In this context, urban resilience, un-



derstood as a city's ability to adapt, recover, and develop after extreme shocks, including armed conflicts, becomes a key concept [11, p. 36]. Post-conflict cities typically face a number of systemic challenges: large-scale destruction of housing stock, degradation of utility and transport infrastructure, loss of economic base, demographic imbalances, and weakened institutional governance. These factors create a vulnerable urban environment in which traditional approaches to urban development prove insufficient. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to integrating resilience principles into recovery processes, which entails a shift from short-term reconstruction to long-term strategic development [2].

The Karabakh economic region of Azerbaijan represents a unique example of post-conflict recovery, distinguished by the unprecedented scale of destruction and, at the same time, the opportunity to develop a fundamentally new model of sustainable development. The prolonged occupation caused the engineering, social, and transportation infrastructure to become unusable, and a large percentage of the cities and settlements in the area were almost completely destroyed. According to government agencies of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the level of destruction of the built environment in a number of cities has reached critical levels, requiring not fragmentary reconstruction but a comprehensive urban rethinking of the territory [13]. A distinctive feature of the urban rehabilitation of the Karabakh economic region is its planning, essentially from scratch, based on the principles of sustainable and green development. According to strategic government documents, the region was designated as a zone for the implementation of energy-efficient technologies, renewable energy sources, and intelligent urban infrastructure management systems [5]. This approach allows for the integration of sustainability principles at the early stages of planning, significantly increasing the adaptive potential of emerging urban systems.

Table 1 highlights that the reconstruction of the Karabakh economic region is challenged by the near-total destruction of urban fabric, landmine contamination, environmental degradation, and the complex task of reintegrating displaced populations. These challenges require comprehensive master planning, coordinated institutional frameworks, and the integration of environmental remediation and resilient infrastructure into the rebuilding process. Overall, successful reconstruction in Karabakh depends on balancing the urgency of rapid recovery with long-term sustainability, resilience, and social inclusivity.

Table 1.**Main Challenges of City Reconstruction in the Karabakh Economic Region**

Challenge Category	Description of the Challenge	Implications for Urban Reconstruction
<i>Scale of Physical Destruction</i>	Large parts of cities and settlements were almost completely destroyed, including housing stock, public buildings, transport infrastructure, and utility networks	Necessitates comprehensive master planning, high capital investment, long implementation periods, and phased reconstruction strategies rather than incremental renewal
<i>Landmine Contamination and Safety Risks</i>	The extensive presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance across urban and peri-urban areas limits access to land and delays construction activities	Slows down reconstruction timelines, increases costs, and requires close coordination between urban planners and demining authorities
<i>Return and Reintegration of Population</i>	Large-scale displacement created demographic gaps and disrupted social net-	Urban planning must ensure livability, economic viability, and social inclusivity to sup-



	works. Returning populations require not only housing but also employment, services, and social infrastructure	port sustainable resettlement and prevent secondary migration
<i>Institutional and Governance Complexity</i>	Reconstruction involves multiple actors, including state institutions, local authorities, international partners, and private investors	Requires strong coordination mechanisms, transparent decision-making, and consistent regulatory frameworks to ensure effective implementation
<i>Balancing Speed and Sustainability</i>	Social pressure for rapid reconstruction may conflict with long-term sustainability objectives	Emphasizes the need for strategic planning that integrates energy efficiency, climate resilience, cultural heritage protection, and smart technologies

The concept of sustainability in the context of Karabakh takes on not only environmental and technical but also socio-spatial significance. The return of the population to the restored cities requires the creation of a safe, comfortable, and socially inclusive urban environment that promotes the restoration of urban identity and trust in the space. In this context, priority is given to creating jobs, developing public spaces, restoring cultural heritage, and ensuring access to basic urban functions [15, p. 141–145]. Thus, the challenges of restoring and resilience in post-conflict cities in the Karabakh economic region confirm that sustainable urban development is a system-forming element of reconstruction. In the context of the almost complete destruction of the urban environment, resilience becomes a strategic tool that allows not only for the restoration of lost functions but also for the formation of a qualitatively new development model focused on long-term stability, adaptability, and balanced growth in the region [2; 15, p. 141–152].

Formation of Urban Planning Context in the Karabakh Economic Region

Shaping the urban development context in post-conflict regions relies not only on the universal principles of modern urban planning but also on national territorial development priorities. In Azerbaijan, this process is closely linked to state strategic documents that define the restoration of liberated territories as one of the key objectives of the country's socio-economic policy. In this context, urban planning is viewed as a tool for spatial integration, sustainable development, and population reintegration [4, p.12-15].

In post-conflict contexts, the principles of comprehensiveness, phased planning, and sustainability are particularly important. According to the State Committee for Urban Development and Architecture of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the restoration of cities in the Karabakh economic region is being carried out based on master plans and development concepts focused on energy efficiency, environmental safety, and the functional balance of the urban environment [13]. These principles are complemented by the creation of modern engineering infrastructure and comfortable public spaces. The formation of a new urban context for the Karabakh economic region is taking place amid the almost complete loss of the previous urban structure of most settlements. The prolonged occupation has led to the destruction of housing, public buildings, and transport infrastructure, as well as the degradation of the urban planning structure.

In terms of the degree of preservation of the urban environment, cities in the Karabakh economic region can be divided into three main categories.

1. Cities with almost completely destroyed buildings, where reconstruction is carried out essentially from scratch. Such cities are characterized by the development of new master plans, the formation of a street and road network, and functional zoning based on modern principles of sustainable development. This approach is widely used in the planning of the cities of Aghdam and Fuzuli, where reconstruction is aimed at creating a compact, energy-efficient, and socially oriented urban environment [13].



2. Cities with partially damaged urban fabric, where individual elements of the planning structure or engineering infrastructure remain. In these cases, the urban planning context is formed through a combination of reconstruction of surviving elements and new construction. The primary objective is to integrate the surviving fragments into a renewed spatial model, thereby preserving the continuity of the urban structure and simultaneously enhancing its functional quality [1, p. 88–89].

3. The city of Shusha occupies a special place, regarded as a unique historical and cultural center and an "open-air museum." In accordance with state programs, the development of Shusha is focused on the priority preservation of the historical planning structure, architectural heritage, and cultural landscape. Urban planning solutions here are restoration and conservation in nature and are aimed at minimal intervention in the historical environment, while simultaneously developing cultural tourism and the city's public functions [10, p. 4–7]. The evolution of the urban development landscape in the Karabakh economic region is marked by a distinct strategy, reflecting the extent of urban decay and their functional and cultural particularities. The utilization of local data and national strategic documents facilitates the adaptation of international sustainable urban development concepts to the region's actual realities, hence providing more effective and informed urban rehabilitation.

Urban reconstruction in the Karabakh Economic Region follows a differentiated approach based on the degree of destruction and the functional-cultural significance of each city. Three main models can be identified: full reconstruction from scratch in heavily destroyed cities such as Aghdam and Fuzuli; integrated reconstruction in partially damaged cities, combining preserved elements with new development; and a conservation-oriented model in Shusha, where planning prioritizes heritage protection and minimal intervention. This context-sensitive strategy allows sustainable urban development principles to be adapted to local conditions, ensuring that reconstruction efforts respond effectively to both spatial realities and cultural specificities of the region. Table 2 highlights the differentiated typology of urban reconstruction approaches in the Karabakh Economic Region, distinguishing between cities rebuilt from scratch, partially reconstructed urban structures, and heritage-oriented conservation models.

Table 2.

Typology of Urban Reconstruction Approaches in the Karabakh Economic Region

Category	Urban Condition	Planning Strategy	Key Characteristics
Cities with Almost Completely Destroyed Urban Fabric	Extensive destruction with little to no remaining urban structure	Reconstruction from scratch through new master plans with preservation of key urban structure and distinctive architectural features	Comprehensive overhaul utilizing intelligent, sustainable, and energy-efficient urban systems
Cities with Partially Damaged Urban Structure	Partial destruction of residential, public, and infrastructural elements with some surviving structures	Integrated approach combining reconstruction of surviving elements with new development	Hybrid urban form with integrated old–new fabric and phased redevelopment
Heritage-Oriented City (Conservation Model)	Presence of culturally significant urban fabric requiring protection (e.g., Shusha)	Preservation of cultural identity and authenticity with controlled, tourism-oriented development	Restoration- and conservation-based planning with minimal intervention



Implementation of Sustainable Urban Planning Approaches in Karabakh region

In Azerbaijan, the sustainable development agenda has been consolidated in recent years not only through international frameworks but also through national priorities. In the document "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities of Socio-Economic Development," sustainability is directly linked to two key areas: "The Great Return" and "a clean environment and green growth" [12]. At the same time, Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur regions are positioned as areas for accelerated implementation of energy efficiency, renewable energy, and "smart city/smart village" concepts, providing a framework for sustainable post-conflict planning. The social component of sustainable urban development in the Karabakh economic region is closely linked to the implementation of "The Great Return" program and the reintegration of internally displaced persons. Unlike traditional urban modernization, which focuses on infrastructure renovation, the Karabakh case involves the restoration of urban communities that have been absent from their territories for almost three decades. There are a number of important areas where sustainability concepts are applied in the social realm:

First, settlement planning and housing provision. Modern energy efficiency, accessibility, and social inclusion criteria are taken into consideration when designing new residential neighborhoods. A progressive settlement approach that is coordinated with the development of social services, transportation infrastructure, and jobs is provided by master plans. This strategy encourages the development of sustainable urban communities and inhibits the emergence of residential districts with only one purpose. A total of 34,500 apartments and private houses are planned to be built and commissioned in liberated territories by the end of 2026 as part of first phase of reconstruction and settlement efforts. These housing units are part of a broader effort to resettle internally displaced persons (IDPs) in stages back to their ancestral lands, with built infrastructure meeting modern standards of safety, accessibility and sustainability [4]. The Great Return Program's **second phase** will be completed by 2040 and will be divided into three stages, spanning 2026–2040.

Second, the creation of social infrastructure. Early in the planning process, new districts are designed to incorporate public areas, cultural facilities, administrative buildings, medical facilities, and educational institutions. This illustrates the knowledge that equal opportunity and access to essential services are just as important to a sustainable city as housing.

Third, employment and economic integration. Programs for economic development, such as agro-industrial clusters, tourism growth (particularly in Shusha), and renewable energy initiatives, are linked with decisions on urban planning. Establishing employment close to residential areas lowers the chance of re-migration and guarantees long-term demographic stability.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of sustainable urban development approaches in the Karabakh economic region shows that post-conflict reconstruction is being implemented on the basis of an integrated and multi-layered territorial development model. The reconstruction process is not limited to the physical restoration of destroyed settlements, but also includes demographic planning, social infrastructure development, environmental regeneration, energy efficiency, and cultural heritage preservation.

First, the housing strategy is based on a phased settlement model synchronized with the State Program on the "Great Return." The first phase, planned until 2026, envisages the construction of 34,500 residential units, while the master plans of individual cities, particularly Aghdam, project a long-term demographic capacity of approximately 100,000 residents. This demonstrates that reconstruction is oriented not only toward the short-term return of the population, but also toward the long-term development of a sustainable urban environment. Second, the development of social infrastructure is integrated into the early stages of planning. Educational institutions, medical centers, and public facilities are planned in parallel with residential development. This approach supports the formation of functionally complete urban districts rather than isolated residential areas, thereby strengthening social sustainability and spatial balance. Third, the environmental component reflects



a transition toward a “green” reconstruction model. Forest restoration, the creation of green belts, the application of energy-efficiency standards, and the integration of renewable energy sources are considered structural elements of the new master plans [3]. In cities with almost complete destruction of the built environment, such as Aghdam, green infrastructure becomes one of the main spatial frameworks for future development. Fourth, cultural regeneration, particularly in Shusha, is carried out through restoration, conservation, and the preservation of historical urban morphology. The restoration of monuments and cultural sites performs not only an architectural function, but also a symbolic role by strengthening cultural identity and creating conditions for the development of cultural tourism.

Thus, the reconstruction of the Karabakh economic region demonstrates a comprehensive approach that combines spatial, demographic, environmental, social, and cultural factors. The proposed model differs from traditional urban modernization practices, where reconstruction usually involves the upgrading of existing infrastructure. In the case of Karabakh, reconstruction is associated with the creation of a new territorial structure based on sustainable development principles. A key strength of the current model is the synchronization of housing construction with the development of social infrastructure. This reduces the risk of forming incomplete or low-quality settlements and increases the viability of new districts from the initial stages of resettlement. At the same time, long-term sustainability will depend on the parallel development of the economic base, employment opportunities, and effective institutional coordination.

The environmental orientation of reconstruction reflects Azerbaijan’s strategic transition toward green development. However, the effectiveness of renewable energy systems, energy-efficient infrastructure, and climate-sensitive planning will depend on long-term management mechanisms and consistent implementation. Demographic projections also present both opportunities and challenges. Although official targets foresee a significant return of the population, the actual dynamics may be more gradual. Therefore, flexible planning decisions and phased project implementation are essential to avoid infrastructure overcapacity or underutilization. In a broader theoretical context, the experience of the Karabakh economic region demonstrates the potential of transforming a post-conflict territory from a space of reconstruction into a platform for sustainable territorial development. The integration of social, environmental, economic, and cultural components corresponds to the international “Build Back Better” principle, while also reflecting Azerbaijan’s national strategic priorities. This makes the Karabakh case an important example of how post-conflict urban reconstruction can be directed toward long-term sustainability, resilience, and cultural continuity.

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QARABAĞ İQTİSADI RAYONUN MÜNAQİŞƏDƏN SONRAKİ ƏRAZİLƏRİNDƏ DAVAMLI ŞƏHƏRSALMA YANAŞMALARI

R.R. Mahmudov

Dayanıqlılıq müasir global inkişafın əsas ideyalarından birinə çevrilərək, şəhərlərin layihələndirilməsi, enerji siyasətinin formalaşdırılması və iqtisadi inkişaf modellərinin qurulmasına mühüm təsir göstərir. Münaqişədən sonrakı şəraitdə dayanıqlı şəhərsalmanın əhəmiyyəti daha da artır, çünki bərpa prosesi yalnız şəhər infrastrukturunun yenidən qurulmasını deyil, eyni zamanda sosial həmrəyliyin, ekoloji tarazlığın və iqtisadi fəallığın bərpasını da əhatə etməlidir. Azərbaycanın Qarabağ iqtisadi rayonu bu baxımdan genişmiqyaslı post-münaqişə yenidənqurma prosesinin əhəmiyyətli nümunəsini təqdim edir. Bu məqalə Qarabağ iqtisadi rayonunun post-münaqişə şəhərlərində tətbiq olunan dayanıqlı şəhərsalma yanaşmalarını araşdırır və enerji səmərəliliyi, ekoloji dayanıqlılıq, funksional zonalaşdırma və sosial inklüzivlik prinsiplərinə xüsusi diqqət yetirir. Uzunmüddətli işğal dövrü şəhər landşaftının və infrastrukturun demək olar ki, tamamilə dağıdılmasına səbəb olmuşdur. Tədqiqatın nəticələri göstərir ki, dayanıqlı şəhərsalma yalnız texniki həll mexanizmi deyil, eyni zamanda şəhər kimliyinin bərpası, dayanıqlılığın gücləndirilməsi və post-münaqişə ərazilərində bəsləndirilmiş inkişafın təmin edilməsi üçün strateji alətdir.

Açar sözlər: *davamlılıq, urbanizasiya, sosial təsir, şəhər qiymətləndirməsi, effektiv idarəetmə.*



ПОДХОДЫ К УСТОЙЧИВОМУ ГОРОДОСТРОИТЕЛЬСТВУ НА ПОСТКОНФЛИКТНЫХ ТЕРРИТОРИЯХ КАРАБАХСКОГО ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОГО РАЙОНА

Р.Р. Махмудов

Устойчивое развитие стало ключевой идеей современного глобального развития, влияя на то, как мы проектируем города, формируем энергетическую политику и развиваем экономику. Постконфликтные условия значительно усиливают важность устойчивого градостроительства, поскольку необходимы работы по восстановлению не только городской инфраструктуры, но и социальной сплочённости, экологического баланса и экономической жизнеспособности. Карабахский экономический регион Азербайджана является убедительным примером столь масштабной после конфликтной реконструкции. В данной статье рассматриваются устойчивые подходы к градостроительству, применяемые в постконфликтных городах Карабахского экономического района, с акцентом на энергоэффективность, экологическую устойчивость, функциональное зонирование и социальную инклюзивность. Длительные периоды оккупации привели к почти полному уничтожению городских ландшафтов и инфраструктуры. Результаты показывают, что устойчивое градостроительство-это не только техническое решение, но и стратегический инструмент восстановления городской идентичности, повышения устойчивости и обеспечения сбалансированного развития на постконфликтных территориях.

Ключевые слова: устойчивое развитие, урбанизация, социальное воздействие, оценка городов, эффективное управление.