

## **The Persistent Element in the Old Urban Fabric, Erbil Bazar Area**

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*Every culture and every city faces multiple transformations and changes in different perspectives that could impact its peculiarity. Architecture, urban form, and space, have always been the aspects that adapt or absorb these changes through growth and series of superimposed layers of intervention. Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region in the north of Iraq, a historic city of great significance which its old citadel was recently placed on the World Heritage Sites in 2014, has undergone many changes and events. Hence, in order to preserve and manage the change of the old urban fabric and protect its particularity for future generations, it is important to identify its main persistent elements. As well, to understand the changes that occurred on these elements and extract the knowledge from them. The historic part of Erbil is the old citadel and the traditional urban fabric that surrounds it. The main aim of this study is to highlight that the grand gate with its location is a continuous/persistent element that has absorbed change and worked as a propelling aspect impacting the growth and developments of this area. Diachronic analysis was adopted, for the period from 1745 to 2013. The methods of analysis were interviews, historical reviews, observation and visual analysis. The study emphasized on the importance of the grand gate and concluded that the south gate, the node, is the main element that impacted and have been impacted by the change.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over time every city faces multiple transformations and changes as part of its natural growth and development. Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region in the north of Iraq, and a historic city of great significance which was placed on the Iraqi tentative list of World Heritage Sites in 2007 (S.P.A., 2011, P.3) and entered in 2014 has undergone many changes and events. The historic part of Erbil is the old citadel and the traditional urban fabric that surrounds it. The traditional fabric, consists of the residential and bazar areas. This study will focus on the south part area that surrounds the citadel, located at its southern end.

The main aim of this study is to emphasis on the importance of the grand gate and to argue that the gate with its concept of the threshold and its location is considered to be persistent element which works as a propelling factor that impacts on the growth and development of the bazar area and the citadel itself. This study will deal with the diachronic approach to understand and analyze the role of the persistent concept in the evolution of the urban form and space of the old urban fabric of Erbil. In order to achieve the main aim the following objectives will be followed in defining the persistent elements: highlighting

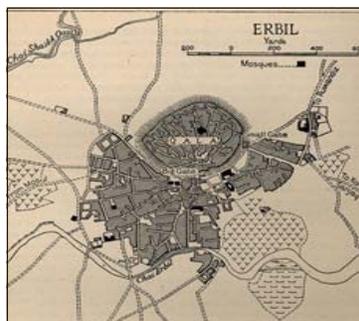
the changes that happened to the main gate throughout history, and identifying how the old urban fabric of the bazar area has adapted to accommodate its relationship with the gate. As an introduction, a general background of the historical urban fabric is described in the following section, which also focuses on the specific nature of the gate.

## THE OLD URBAN FABRIC OF ERBIL

The old city of Erbil was divided into the citadel of Erbil and the old urban fabric that surrounds it. The citadel has three districts: the Serai, for the rich and noble families, the Topkhana, for farmers and craftsmen, and the Takya the religious area of Sufi houses and dervishes (Al-Haidari, 1985, P.64). The houses inside the citadel have changed and been rebuilt over the centuries, but the alleyways and paths seem to have remained unchanged in their original pattern and have the character of a tree with its branches and roots, which start from the grand south gate (Micheltmore, interview, 2013). In the past the citadel was surrounded by a wall and bridges and had a moat under its hill, similar to the other fortresses initiated on tell sites and distributed across the region, such as, Kirkuk in Iraq and Aleppo in Syria. In more recent centuries another two gates were added, the moat disappeared, and the wall was replaced by a continuous ring of houses (Micheltmore, interview, 2013; Aldabbagh, interview, 2013). Many travelers and archaeologists had visited or passed by the city and described the gate, the defensive wall with its towers and the moat at the base of the mound; notable are descriptions by C. Neibuhr in 1766 and other historical records from the middle Ages, as well as, local historians who had lived within the city.

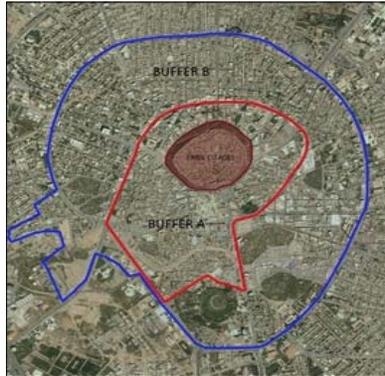
Outside the citadel from its south part, the location of the grand gate, routes expanded to the plain below and these constituted a commercial area, the bazar in the region nearest to it (Figure-1). In addition, three historic residential districts, Arab, Taajeel and Khanaqa developed beyond the bazar in the south, west and easterly direction. The types of houses in these old areas were characterized by their courtyards, while the street patterns have narrow irregular shapes; these attributes of the traditional urban fabric are similar to the citadel's pattern (S.P.A., 2011, P.7). In different periods Erbil has faced different stages of change and growth. In 2007 UNESCO and the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalization, HCECR, have been working to preserve the old citadel and these traditional parts. They obtained permission from UNESCO to re-build the grand gate of the citadel as part of the conservation process. The traditional districts, outside the citadel, were divided according to their importance into buffer zones A and B, conforming to UNESCO's rules (Figure-2). Monitoring the changes that have occurred to the urban elements of the old city of Erbil - one of them is being the gate - will lead us to establish the continuous aspects and vital elements. This will pave the way in helping to manage the change in this area and could provide a viable approach for any historic cities in general.

**FIGURE 1**  
**CITY OF ERBIL IN 1920**



(Source: From Iraq and the Persian Gulf, Great Britain, Naval Intelligence Division, 1944)

**FIGURE 2**  
**BUFFER ZONES A & B**



(Source: ARS Progetti report, 2010)

### **THE GRAND GATE AND THE CHANGE**

The traditional function of the gate is to act as the transition between the outer and inner cities. It allows the flow of people, animals and goods besides protecting the city from any strangers or attackers. The city of Erbil was protected by one main gate and probably the reason behind its location is that the top of the Citadel looks like a bowl and it has to drain out somewhere and the south part is the lowest part of the mound.

The main gate throughout history protected the city from strangers and different attacks and resist long sieges. The last of these was by the Persian ruler, Nadir Shah in 1743 which lasted for 60 days, who surrounded the city which was under Ottoman rule and this siege cause destructed the gate. Later the gate was erected and paid for by the Ottoman treasury during the reign of Sultan Mahmud I (Governorate, 2012). The excavations on the Citadel have found evidence of the older walls, however John MacGinnis, a specialist in Assyrian civilization at Cambridge University, thinks that the walls damaged in the siege were levelled and never reconstructed (Michelmore, 2013). The small East Gate was probably formed in the late Ottoman period, but its dating is uncertain. It can be seen in the earliest photographs and it existed on the earliest extant plans. The North (Ahmedi) gate was built through half of one of the perimeter houses by the first mayor of Erbil in 1925 (Michelmore, interview, 2013; Al-Dabbagh, interview, 2013).

### **PERSISTENT ELEMENTS (THEORETICAL PROPOSITION)**

The city is a series and synthesis of different layers and aspects which configure its form and space and reflect its particularity. The growth and structural change of these cities, is a result of the impact of different internal and external factors. Therefore, any change that happens to the city comes as a consequence of variant private and public aspects, whether economic, socio-cultural, religious or environmental. These changes need a management more than conservational process and that could be through morphological studies which monitor the change and identify the persistent or continuous elements that constitute these urban fabric. There is agreement between the theories, such as Larkham and Chapman, 1996 and Mageean, 1998 that urban morphology is significant ground which gives a practical theory of management and conservation of the historic area. Larkham argues that the importance of urban morphology lies on three levels. The first level introduces the clarification of the continuity and persistency in the build environment; the second level indicates the historical changes and the developments of the place. Whereas, the final gives analytical framework of observing and understanding

the change through dividing the urban landscape into streets, plots and buildings (Pendlebury, 2009, p. 36).

Dealing with the idea of change permits us to understand a key term in a historic urban fabric, namely persistence/ permanence. Persistence is a vital notion as without it change will result in a discontinuity with the past, as is the case following catastrophic natural events and human action. This term has been experienced in different fields, one of them being the realm of architecture and urban design, through different scholars of architecture and urban design directly or implicitly such as, Poete, Lavedan, Rossi, Levy, Bahanasy, Woo and Hui and Cohen. The theories indicate the important role of the permanent idea or elements which can help to define the individuality of the community or city and create a strong connection with the past. Therefore, within all the changes that have happened to the urban structure of the city some distinctive urban elements and patterns still remain to carry the meaning from the past while offering potential for the future since, as Cohen indicates, they are the creative and vital forces behind construction of the city (Cohen, 1998, P.157).

These features, called persistent elements, work as a catalyst for the growth and change of the urban fabric. For example, Levy indicates the vital role of the persistent elements for determining the changes and the evolution of the old urban fabric. Therefore the process of developments and change in the city is not a chaos, it is determined by these constant elements (Levy, 1999, pp 79-81). Al-Bahanasy (1982) connects change with persistent aspects and emphasises on the importance of recognizing both of them in any structure. In his view persistency reflects the structure's identity, whereas the changeable aspects denote the developments and adaptation within the current situation. He also, stresses the importance of both continuity and change because dealing with the former (Al-Bahanasy, 1982, p.100). Poete introduces the notion of the persistence through the continuity of the plan and city's layout along with the monuments. Cities as stated by Poete incline to grow and change according to its main layout and towards the direction of their old artefacts. While the plans could face some distortion and deformation their persistency reveal in its substance. The artefacts as Poete indicates cannot be changed and they continue their importance or they could be consumed or exhausted and only remains of their locus, form could be persisted.

Lavadan's theory on persistence appears in the generator of the plan which is revealed through the streets, urban monuments and physical structure of the city (Lavadan, 1982, pp.91-92). Rossi describes the persistent elements either pathological or propelling and vital elements in the city. The former stands as obstacle element and isolated in the urban fabric and rarely connect to it. Whereas, the latter, propelling elements helps to understand the whole city because its properties accepts different modifications and continues to absorb different functions. Beside that it works as focus points help to organize and constitute the urban fabric and connect strongly to the city. However, both cases as Rossi indicates are part of the city that helped to constitute this urban fabric. He also describes the function of the permanence in the way that "they serve to bring the past into the present, providing a past that can still be experienced" (Rossi, 1982, pp6-62). He stresses on the role of the primary elements on constituting the city through their permanence attribute. Thus, the historical persistent or continues elements are revealed strongly in the urban form and space through the diachronic approach. These elements play a dynamic role in the evolution and developments of the urban fabric and determining the configuration of the current situation (Levy, 1999, P81).

Generally it can be suggested that the persistent elements play a vital role in constituting urban fabric through their propelling attributes. These elements materialize in different aspects it could be one of the primary urban elements, such as path, node, urban artefact or the urban pattern and layout. They reveal clearly through analyzing and monitoring the change that happed to the old urban fabric diachronically and they own some properties such as dominance, adaptation, and relationship of part to whole.

## **THE MAIN GATE ANALYSIS**

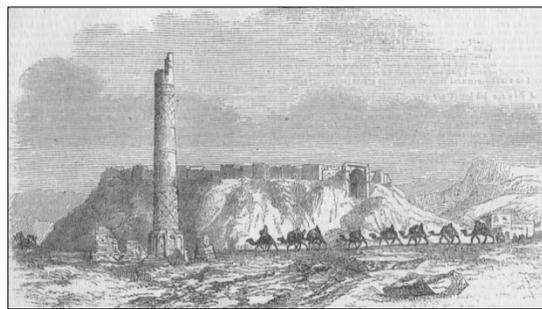
In order to argue that the gate is one of a persistent or continuous element in Erbil and has influenced the growth and development of the old urban fabric surrounding it, a chronological period between 1745

until 2013 is identified. This is divided into three stages according to the main events that the gate had encountered. A descriptive analytical method supported by interviews and observations is employed here to assess and match the persistent attributes for the main gate of Erbil citadel. The gate will be examined against three main variables identified above - dominance, relationship of part to whole, and adaptation.

### **Stage One (1745-1958)**

The gate in this stage has continued its dominance with various level of influence. The dominance of the function was strong when it was the only gate at that time (Figure 3). It functioned to protect the citadel and represented a short route between the bazar area and the citadel itself.

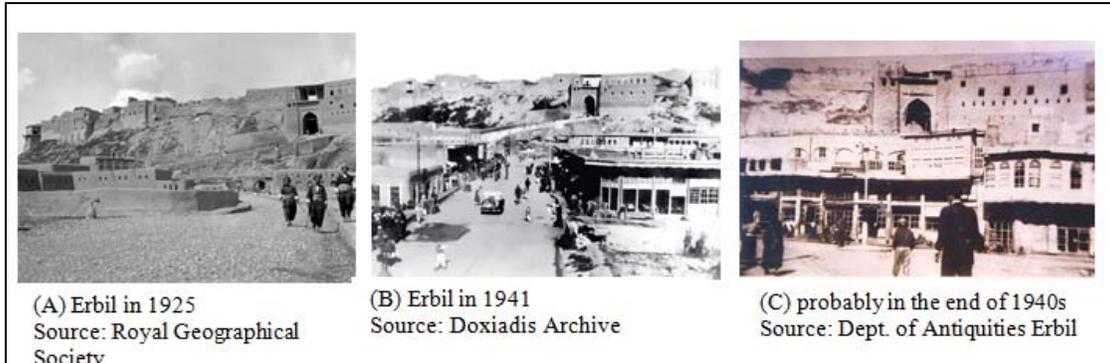
**FIGURE 3**  
**THE ENGRAVING OF ERBIL CITADEL, SHOWS THE GATE WITH THE OLD MINARET.**  
**THE VIEW WAS DRAWN BETWEEN 1841 AND 1844 BY EUGÈNE FLANDIN**



(Source: The Illustrated Times, 19 September 1857)

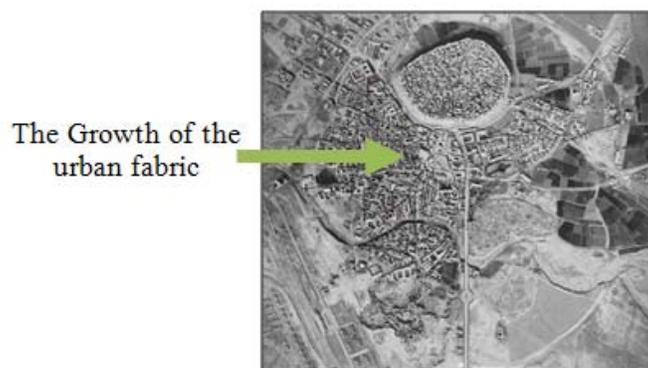
In the second half of nineteenth century the building of the gate absorbed other functions and different layers were added to its construction and that led to increasing its functional dominance. This was clear from the observation on maps and the photos beside the interviews with archaeologist and local people. These functions were the Sarai which was offices for the local administration and included a jail cell beside a house for the Ottoman official (Michelmor, interview, 2013; Al-Dabagh, interview, 2013). After 1923, following the opening of the third gate in the north part by the first mayor of Erbil, and the introduction of automobiles, the roads were paved, and the pressure of the gate use has been reduced. As is evident from drawings and the engraving (figure-3) from the nineteenth century, the gate was a highly prominent feature standing on a hill. The location of the gate was noticeable in a very large scale and that made the gate to work as a focal point. This attribute gave a directional sense to the citadel which led to attracting travelers and outsiders to the city and started to work with the old minaret, Choli minaret, as a landmark for the city in general. The photos that were taken in early twentieth century indicate that the gate has retained its dominance within the scale of the buildings that surrounded the citadel on the south part. In addition, the gate has the ability to adapt itself with different functions and shapes; in the beginning it was allocated to function as a normal citadel gate, later on it absorbed another functions as mentioned above. In 1935 the level containing the Sarai was demolished and new one was built outside the citadel. Later in 1958 the gate was demolished. In terms of the relationship of part to whole the gate has its vital role in the constitution of the old urban fabric that surrounds the citadel. That was obvious through monitoring the aerial photographs and maps. The paths of the old urban fabric that surrounds the citadel were extended from the gate and continued with the same pattern and routs towards the bazar area see (Figure-4 and 5).

**FIGURE 4**  
**ERBIL URBAN FABRIC AND THE STAGES OF THE OLD GATE AND**  
**THE SCALE OF THE URBAN FABRIC**



In this stage it is very clear that the dominance in function was changeable. The gate initially absorbed but then lost different functions. The dominance in scale was very clear in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century comparing with other settlements that surrounded the gate at that time. As a focal point the gate has changed because in the past it worked for the citadel as an element providing protection and it was opened and closed. Later on, both the need and the sense of the protection gradually disappeared and was replaced with an open passageway and kept its function as connection between the inside and outside parts. The sense of direction was obvious. In the beginning the position of the gate, its height, and the few settlements with their small scale were locating near the citadel and gave the gate a strong sense of direction. Later on with growth of the urban structure with their different heights impacted on this sense of direction.

**FIGURE 5**  
**AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF ERBIL, 1951, SHOWING THE CITADEL AND HISTORIC**  
**TOPOGRAPHY OF ERBIL**



**Stage Two (1958-2007)**

When the grand gate was demolished by the government for constructional reasons, the location of the gate remained as a gap. The urban fabric that surrounded the gate followed the same pattern of the previous stage. The standard of living had changed and that led some people to leave the citadel and settle outside it, which caused urban growth within its surroundings. At that time the situation of the buildings and the infrastructure of the citadel was very weak and needed more attention. In the end of 1970s the

Iraqi government decided to undertake rehabilitation of the gate and the citadel. A new gate was designed by the Iraqi consultancy bureau (Al-Haidari, 1983, p.63; Al-Dabbagh, interview, 2013) (Figure 6 and 7).

The new gate design did not meet expectations of the local people. Some interviewees (Al-Dabbagh, interview, 2013; Mufti, interview, 2012) indicate that the design had no relationship with the appearance of the previous old gate and with the adjacent buildings. The observation of photographs indicate that the design was not related to the old citadel. It resulted in a discontinuity in the citadel's elevation in terms of its construction, and design pattern. The old construction was a building that absorbed different functions aside the traditional functions. While the new reduced to a threshold between outside and inside the citadel, it looked as discontinuous skin occupying the existing gap and lost the meaning of protection. The design patterns was different in terms of the shape of the windows and its recesses, the rhythm and the repetition of the elevation elements. The dominance of function was changed as abovementioned and the pressure of use was reduced because of other two gates were opened and of many people were moved to the plain land and left the citadel. The sense of direction was changed because of the new constructions that were built in the bazar area from two to four stories beside the size of the urban fabric that surround the citadel which started to be increased. However, the streets remained working towards the direction of the gate and the citadel. The gate in this stage started to be an isolated skin hiding the entrance of the old city. The statue for Al-Mostawfie, the famous historian who lived in Erbil, which was added as a part of the citadel rehabilitation, started to attract the attention beside the gate itself.

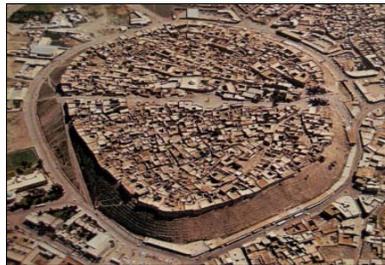
The impact of the gate was extended inside the citadel. As a part of the rehabilitation of the citadel, a path was established between the North and South gates and that was on the expense of the old urban fabric. Therefore, the relationships of the part and whole was very clear inside the citadel and worked fluently outside.

**FIGURE 6**  
**THE NEW SKIN AND THE SITUATION OF THE OLD URBAN FABRIC, PERHAPS 1970s**



(Source: Taken by George Gerster)

**FIGURE 7**  
**THE NEW SKIN AND THE SITUATION OF THE OLD URBAN FABRIC**



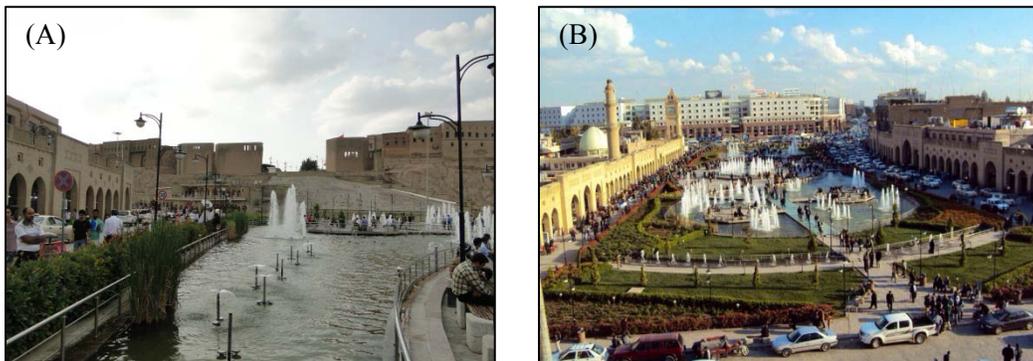
(Source: Dept. of Antiquities, Erbil)

To sum up this stage the gate appeared again but with, shape, design and changed its function. The dominance of the function changed to a normal passageway. While, the dominance of shape with its obvious height has no sense of belonging and elements in the elevation have no relation with citadel's façade. The disconnection between the new skin and the adjacent buildings. The neglecting look for the old parts in the bazar construction helped the dominance of the gate to be shown with its new material. The function as a connection point between the inside and outside part was kept. The visual impact has determined the building height, and the street expansion. In the citadel the gate has its own impact on the central path. The gate in a specific and the citadel in general has its significant influence on the height of the building that surround these area.

### Stage Three (2007-2013)

In 2007 the conservation process has been started on the citadel, the buffer zone A and B. According to this process different changes have accord on the bazar area, such as the new skins that were added to surround the bazar elevations, the clock tower, and the square that replaced the shops and some other components (Figure-8). According to some interviewees and based on maps and photos for the new square, indicate that the dominance of the gate has increased. However, some other interviewees and tourists are of the view that these new feature have reduced the sense of belonging. This square, as one interviewee says, is similar to European cities and it does not fit in with this historical context. They assert that the clock-tower has no connection in style and design with the old urban fabric and it is started to destruct the vision of the gate. The skin that was added to the bazar fabric start to separate the fabric from each other, therefore the relationship became weak and it is like separate elements working together. Functionally the gate now is not working because of the rehabilitation process and currently the main load now on the north gate, where the cars can reach inside the citadel. So, temporary the functional dominance in this stage is not working. The decision has now made to rebuild the old gate again and a permission was taken from the UNESCO to start this process and it is almost finished.

**FIGURE 8**  
**THE CHANGES ON THE GATE LOCATION AND THE OLD URBAN FABRIC WITH ITS CHANGE INCLUDE, TOWER CLOCK, NEW SKIN AND THE NEW SHOPPING CENTRE**



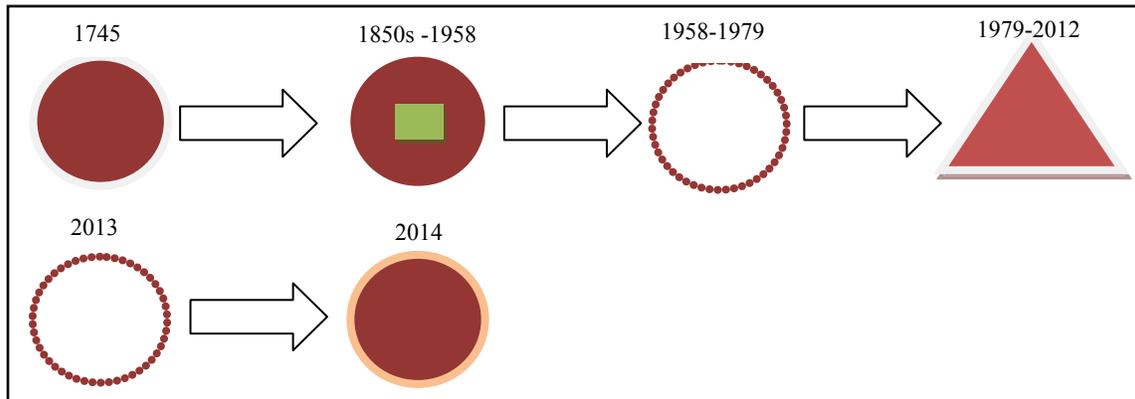
(Source: (A) Taken by the Author; (B) Taken by the Mazin Al-Safi)

### DISCUSSION

The historic analysis of the gate suggests that it has always been a dynamic element in the city which impacts the urban fabric of the citadel and the bazar area. Over the last several decades the changes that happened to the gate and the surrounding fabric designate that the gate has had a dynamic role on impacting the urban fabric and being impacted by different factors. It has worked as a node and a landmark beside its functional usage. The changes that have happened to the gate within chronological periods, start from 1745 up to the current situation, indicate that the gate is a persistent element and

considered as a part of the whole which has bridged the past to the future. These kind of elements, persistent elements are different from other elements because they continued to offer a guide for any developments and changes. By knowing the history of these elements may highlight and shape any future urban and architectural decision (see digram-1).

**FIGURE 9**  
**THE STAGES OF THE MAIN GATE**



(Source, Author)

## CONCLUSION

The changes that happened to the urban fabric of the bazar area, the citadel and the grand gate of Erbil city from 1745 until the current situation shows the important impact of the gate as a part to whole. So, can the grand gate be a persistent element that has a vital role in these changes? This paper has explored the main gate of the citadel, which has played a key role in the historic changes and argued that this element with its location is a persistent element. It has done so by analyzing the changes that happened to the gate and the urban fabric that surrounded the gate. Therefore, the study concludes that these changes have not just happened, but they occurred in a way that was controlled by the grand gate itself. A better understanding for these kind of elements in any historic city is required for any future design and conservation process.

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