

# Sustainability Policy and Preferred Strategies for the Development of Recreational Zones in Historical City Centers

By Fidan Mustafayeva<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT:

The article examines the existing recreational zones in the central areas of Baku and Nevshehir – cities rich in historical heritage and highlights their significance while proposing future development strategies. Focusing on the recreational zones within the historic city centers of these two urban areas, the study underscores the necessity of developing comprehensive planning proposals to ensure the sustainability of these zones in ecological, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions. The analysis emphasizes the role of these zones in enhancing the development potential of both the cities and their respective countries by integrating them into well-organized tourist routes. It further stresses the need for protection plans to safeguard these valuable areas, preserving their historical and cultural integrity. A survey was conducted to support the strategic development of recreational zones around historic sites. Participants were queried about the challenges and drawbacks that could impede the advancement of recreational zones in historical centers. Insights from the survey were used to formulate a structural plan aimed at fostering the sustainable development of these recreational zones, contributing to the holistic growth and vitality of the cities.

*Keywords: Baku, Icherisheher, Avanos, recreation zones, historical city centers, tourism potential*

## 1. Introduction

The formation of a city's historical structure is significantly influenced by natural factors that have evolved over many years. Elements such as terrain, topography, rivers, seas, and other bodies of water, as well as parks and recreational areas, shape the urban fabric and contribute to its uniqueness (Łopucki, et al., 2018; Opdam & Steingröver, 2018; Wolday, 2023; National,n.d.).Reservoirs have historically played a critical role in the socio-economic, cultural, and historical development of cities, adding to their distinctive urban compositions (Amano et al., 2018; Ettema & Nieuwenhuis 2017; Ferreira et al., 2022; Guadie et al., 2022; Jansson et al., 2020 ).

Assessing the potential of recreational zones is crucial for the sustainable development of two cities one in Azerbaijan and the other in Turkey. These zones are integral to the historically significant central areas of both cities, known for their ancient history and architectural heritage. Notably, both cities are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, underscoring their global cultural importance. This, in turn, creates a foundation for the development of tourism in cities where these architectural ensembles are located. Combined with the development of hotel, restaurant, and individual

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Azerbaijan University of Architecture and Construction, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Fundamentals of Architecture, Baku, Azerbaijan.

transportation services in the city, this strengthens the city's position in the economic sphere. With the right transportation plan, the organization of the road and transportation system develops in a sustainable direction. Another advantage of developing these areas from an economic point of view is the creation of a large number of new jobs for city residents. In other words, the development of the city's economy has a positive impact on both the economic situation of the country and each individual. In addition, the interest of tourists and local residents in architectural ensembles always makes the issue of protecting these monuments relevant. One of the main points here is to prevent problems such as traffic congestion and environmental imbalance caused by large tourist flows by properly organizing recreational areas around the ensemble. Future development plans for these recreational areas must prioritize the preservation of historical ensembles, ensure their integrity while promote sustainable growth.

The climate, soil composition, and availability of local building materials have also played a fundamental role in shaping the ancient architecture within the historical centers of both cities. These factors not only influence urban design but also contribute to the cities' cultural identity.

In Turkey, the region of Nevsehir has long demonstrated its ability to compete on national and international levels due to its rich tourist potential. The city attracts a large influx of tourists throughout the year, driven by its historical and architectural significance, the mild year-round climate, and the availability of seasonally adapted tourist routes. Nevsehir's Cappadocia region stands out as a prominent tourist destination.

Avanos, a historic town within Nevsehir, holds substantial cultural and historical significance, positively influencing the development of tourism in the region. The Kizilirmak River, which flows east to west through Nevsehir, passes through Avanos and Gulshehir, contributing to the area's unique landscape. However, the Kizilirmak River occasionally experiences floods and flash floods, affecting the surrounding areas. In Avanos, the river divides the town into two parts, connected by a stone bridge and a suspension bridge, adding both functionality and charm to the urban landscape. Figure 1 provides further details regarding the Kizilirmak River's course and its impact on the region.

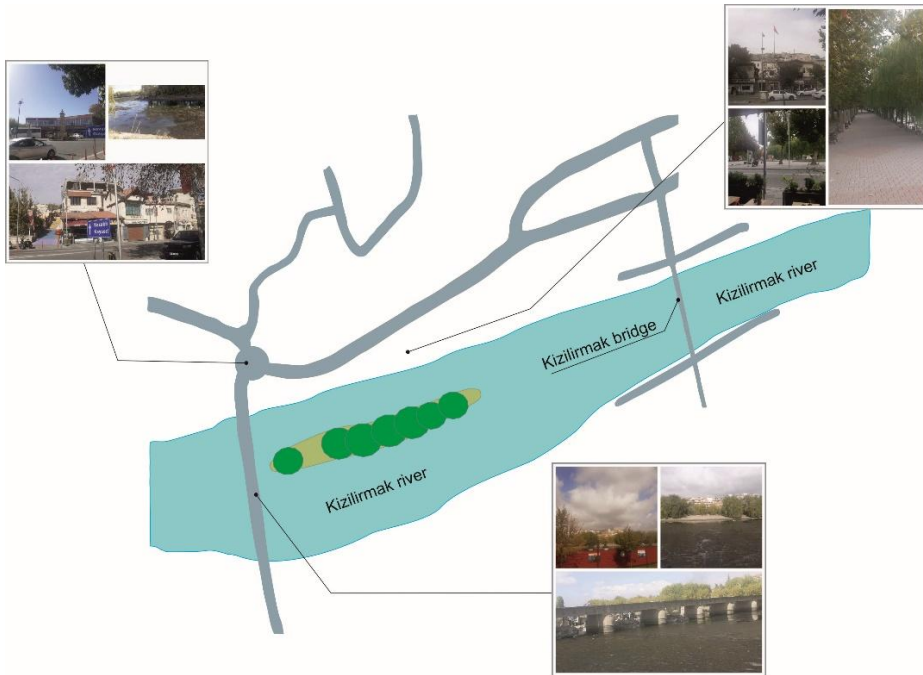


Figure 1. The scheme of the flow direction of the Kizilirmak River on the territory

Within the Goreme-Avanos-Urgup triangle in Nevsehir, Turkey, lies the region of Peri Bajaları (Fairy Chimneys), characterized by rock-carved structures serving various purposes. Tourism is the primary source of income for these areas, which hold significant cultural and historical value. Avanos, a town located approximately 20 km from the center of Nevsehir, is a key part of this region. In recognition of their unique heritage, these areas were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985.

Transportation between Nevsehir's districts is facilitated by well-maintained two-lane asphalt roads (Yılmaz et al., 2020). A 10-kilometer segment of the Kizilirmak River, Turkey's longest river, traverses the Avanos region. In certain areas, the river broadens to form fertile coastal plains, contributing to the area's geographical and ecological diversity.

The administrative boundaries of Avanos encompass an area of 1,045 square kilometers. Urban development in the region has predominantly followed a horizontal pattern, preserving its scenic and traditional character. The average annual temperature in Avanos is recorded at 10.6°C, which supports its suitability for year-round tourism (Tatlıoğlu, 2016).

## 2. Materials and Methods

Before proposing a development concept for the recreational areas of both historical centers, it is essential to conduct thorough research. A comprehensive analysis of the historical development and structure of Icherisheher, the historical core of Baku, serves as a foundational step.

The historical ensemble of Baku's central area is primarily shaped by the architecture and layout of Icherisheher. This UNESCO World Heritage Site attracts a steady influx of tourists each year, drawn to its unique cultural and architectural heritage. The fortress walls surrounding Icherisheher feature multiple entrances, providing access from various directions and enhancing its connectivity. Additionally, the seaside boulevard leading toward the iconic Maiden Tower complements the architectural composition of Icherisheher, serving as a stabilizing and aesthetic element. It is necessary to approach the issue of protecting historical ensembles in large cities sensitively and minimize the damage that tourism development can cause. The problem of car traffic around the architectural monuments protected in the Old City directly affected the sustainability process of these historical monuments. Currently, human-oriented concepts are being implemented on a number of central streets of Baku. Here, car traffic is completely stopped and the streets are given to pedestrians. A multi-storey car park is currently operating on Azerbaijan Avenue near the Old City, next to the Nizami Park. At the same time, it has been decided to restrict car access to the streets around the Old City and the fortress from October 27, 2025 (Qaynar, n.d.). Visitors to the area will enter the area on foot, starting from nearby streets. Thus, the commercial enterprises operating in the area, the number of which has increased with the development of tourism, will also cause less damage to the general condition of this protected area. The historical center is further enriched by the parks and gardens that encircle it, enhancing its visual and ecological appeal.

The architectural ensemble of Icherisheher comprises a harmonious collection of structures, including caravanserais, mosques, baths, minarets, and fortifications. These remarkable buildings have historically played a pivotal role in the political, cultural, and commercial life of the city, reflecting the rich legacy of Baku's urban development (Efendiyev, 2007; Hasanova, 2003; Huseynov et al., 2006).

As previously mentioned, the fortress walls of Icherisheher are surrounded by recreational zones, including gardens, from various directions. When formulating a development plan for the ensemble and its surroundings, it is essential to consider the unique characteristics and historical formation of these parks.

The Gubernatorskiy (or Mikhailov) Garden, covering an area of 4.6 hectares, was developed over an extended period in the relief area surrounding the Icherisheher fortress walls, between Nikolayevsky Street (now Istiglaliyyat Street) and the fortress walls. The garden was opened to the public in 1859, becoming a notable addition to the city's urban landscape.

By 1876, the lower section of the garden had been fully adapted to the natural terrain, offering a picturesque view of the city. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the garden featured a diverse collection of plants imported from various parts of the world, enhancing its aesthetic and botanical significance. In the early 20th century, the upper and lower sections of the garden were connected, improving accessibility and mobility within the park.

In 1912, a public assembly building now the Azerbaijan State Academic Philharmonic was constructed at the intersection of Nikolayevsky Street (present-day Istiglaliyyat Street) and Sadovskiy Street (present-day Niyazi Street). The building's design included a concert hall and a summer stage, seamlessly integrating with the garden's structural and cultural fabric, further enriching the historical and recreational value of the

area (Fatullaev, 2013).

The planning structure of the park incorporates various park and garden amenities, including fountains, kiosks, pavilions, and cafés, which enhance its functionality and aesthetic appeal.

The coastal area of Baku underwent significant transformation starting in 1860, with major developments taking place between 1865 and 1868 following the partial demolition of the Icherisheher fortress walls. The careful planning undertaken during these early stages laid the groundwork for the area's sustained development, which continues to this day.

In recent years, the Baku Boulevard has experienced extensive expansion, extending both eastward and westward. Currently, the boulevard spans an impressive length of 16 kilometers, connecting the White City district to Bibi-Heybat.

The formation of the coastal ensemble began in the early 19th century, integrating a variety of architectural elements into its planning framework. This historical evolution has contributed to the boulevard's status as a prominent cultural and recreational landmark (Alasgarov, 2023).

The Seaside Boulevard forms a key component of the broader Neftchilar Avenue ensemble. The location of the Maiden Tower historical monument within this area creates a cohesive compositional relationship between Icherisheher and the boulevard.

In the past century, several gardens were designed along Istiglaliyyat Street, which runs through the historical center of Baku. The street's reconstruction and revitalization, which occurred many years ago, are widely regarded as successful. A significant portion of the street is now occupied by park and garden spaces. Notably, the Philharmonic Garden, the M.A. Sabir Garden, and the Nizami Ganjavi Garden contribute to the linear arrangement of trees that form the primary composition of the street. These recreational zones, in conjunction with Fountain Square, establish a network of green spaces that connect the historical center of the city with its modern urban fabric (Hasanova, 1996).

Given the dense urban development in this area, the presence of green spaces has a positive impact on the local microclimate, supporting environmental sustainability and enhancing the quality of life for residents and visitors alike. This part of the city can be considered a central exchange point for tourists, serving as a vital hub for both leisure and cultural engagement (Figure 2).

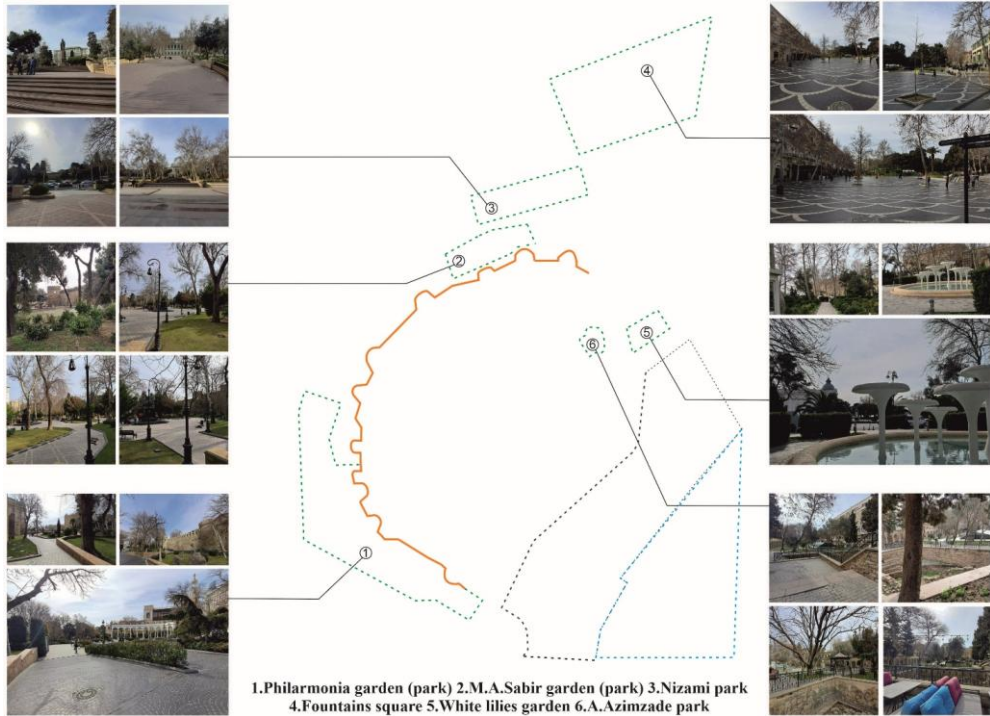


Figure 2. A hub of recreational areas connecting the historical and modern parts of the central part of Baku

Icherisheher was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List and granted the status of a historical and cultural reserve in 2003. The protection of this inner-city area primarily involves measures such as urban regeneration, the restoration of residential and public buildings, and the renewal of streets and parks (Huseynov, 2006).

Currently, large cities are inevitably impacted by the urbanization process. The trajectory and outcomes of this process directly influence the urban structure as well as the lives and livelihoods of the people who live and work within these cities.

The impact of the urbanization process on the city's population can be assessed from two perspectives:

- **Positive Impact:** Job creation
- **Negative Impact:** Pressure on nature and the ecological environment

Several factors negatively affect the human body, including climate, energy, chemical, physical, and biological influences. These factors can be categorized as follows:

- **Climate Influence:** The effects of temperature fluctuations on the environment and human health.
- **Energy Impact:** Energy consumption and the development of smart technologies, among other factors.
- **Chemical-Anthropogenic Pollution:** The process of chemical pollution in the urban atmosphere caused by human activities.

- **Physical Impact:** Noise, electromagnetic radiation, and other physical disturbances.

- **Biological Impact:** The effects of microorganisms that contribute to the pollution of air, water, and soil (Nikonova, 2016).

The areas where historical ensembles exist in the central part of large cities are the most important recreational zones. The microclimate of this place directly affects the formation of the urban macroclimate. As mentioned earlier, prohibiting the entry of cars into the Old City, and surrounding one part of the area with the sea and the other part with parks with fountains will create conditions for the stability of the ecological state of the area. In the future, expanding the area of vegetation in parks and gardens around these zones, which are an integral part of the sustainable development of the city, will further strengthen these protective measures. All the mentioned factors also sufficiently weaken the negative impact of noise in these areas.

In the case of Avanos, the Kızılırmak River, which passes through the area, and the limited areas where cars enter the area create convenience in organizing the ecological balance. The expansion of vegetation in this area can strengthen the factor of ecological sustainability here.

Various scholars have proposed different solutions and approaches to the regeneration of historical centers and their surrounding areas, along with rankings of their effectiveness. A key consideration in this process is ensuring the protection of the health and well-being of individuals who live, work, and spend their leisure time in these zones. In this context, the importance of recreation areas becomes evident, as they play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance while simultaneously fostering cultural and social life.

Factors to be considered in the regeneration process of Icherisheher as a protected zone include:

- ✓ Analyzing the historical and cultural significance of the area.
- ✓ Assessing the stability and structural integrity of the historical environment.
- ✓ Examining the typological diversity and architectural-planning framework of the built environment.
- ✓ Studying the diversity of the architectural-visual system.
- ✓ Investigating the richness of the area's historical legacy.
- ✓ Analyzing the multifunctionality of the traditional structures and the interrelationship between residential and public facilities.
- ✓ Evaluating the typological and functional characteristics of traditional urban life forms (Huseynov, 2006).

To understand the positive impact of green cover on both people and animals, it is essential to assess its value (Demirci & Öztürk, 2022; Yazıcı & Aşur, 2021). The availability of spaces for physical activity is a fundamental aspect of the living environment in large cities (Öcal et al., 2022). The health of the urban population and the preservation of the city's ecological integrity should be key considerations in the recovery and development planning process (Mustafayeva, 2024). The local ecological conditions in various parts of the city contribute to its overall ecological framework. Therefore, the improvement of the ecological situation should be prioritized in the proposed development concept for historical centers. Restoring the city's ecological balance

positively influences the historical center across multiple dimensions.

### 3. Discussion, the Analysis of Individual Factors

The improvement of the ecological environment in Baku can be pursued through two key strategies:

1. The establishment of forest parks in the peri-urban areas and the implementation of water purification systems for irrigation;
2. Waste recycling initiatives within the city and the protection of natural basins from pollution (Hasanova, 1996).

A direct positive impact on the ecological situation is evident through the presence of recreational zones, particularly parks, which can be designed with various structural configurations.

The structural analysis of parks of varying sizes in Azerbaijan yields the following conclusions:

- In historical and fortress-type cities, green spaces are typically organized in a circular layout.
- In cities located in mountainous regions, recreational areas often exhibit a chaotic structure, with scenic views serving as the dominant feature.
- In urban areas with favorable climatic conditions, green belts form a cohesive unity by connecting with the surrounding landscape.
- Green spaces with a linear layout are positioned diametrically within the city planning structure or are arranged locally or linearly, depending on the specific context.

Many of Baku's parks, designed in accordance with natural conditions and urban planning principles, are shaped by the structure of surrounding streets and even transportation hubs (Jafarov, 2011). In the overall city framework, a comprehensive proposal plan should be developed to ensure the creation of sustainable urbanization strategies for the entire historical area and its surrounding zones.

Factors to be considered in the development plan for recreation zones (parks) in historically significant areas include:

- Effective transportation organization surrounding the area;
- Analysis of the historical and cultural impact of both the historical area and the recreation zones within and around it on the city;
- Accurate determination of statistical indicators related to population growth rates in the surrounding residential areas;
- Assessment of the area's tourism potential.

Scientists from various countries have proposed strategies to enhance the tourism potential of cities, including:

- a) Promoting the city globally through online platforms;
- b) Attracting tourists not only through architectural landmarks but also through other forms of art;
- c) Utilizing professional technologies to study architectural and historical heritage;
- d) Implementing ongoing rehabilitation of monuments within the area;
- e) Highlighting the architectural and tourism value of the area by drawing on international experiences in architecture and tourism (Hiroshi, 2005; Li et al., 2022; Yan et

al.,2022; Ishii et al.,2014).

A comprehensive urban development plan, along with social and economic proposals and the protection of the city's ecological balance, can yield significant economic benefits. These positive effects include the costs allocated for safeguarding the quality of life for the population and ensuring environmental sustainability (Mityagin, 2016).

In the architecture of Baku, stylistic features of various cities can be found. For example, when walking through the Old City and its surroundings, the influence of oriental-medieval, neoclassical, eclectic and art nouveau styles is felt in the solution of architectural monuments. Naturally, when restoring existing historical architectural monuments and recreational zones in these areas, the places where the styles originated and their specific features should be taken into account.

The most important point is to preserve architectural objects that have been created at all stages of formation.

Currently, bicycle paths have been laid on the central streets of Baku, and as mentioned, many roads have been completely converted to pedestrian use. This concept has been successfully applied in the cities of Copenhagen and Barcelona. Therefore, the successful continuation of these concepts is possible in Baku, which consists of different, but mutually compatible styles of architectural organization. On the central streets of Baku, there are various objects for meeting daily needs, as applied in Copenhagen. This not only ensures the comfort of people in the central part of the city, but also protects the roads from overloading, and also maintains the balance of the ecological balance.

Tourism is responsible for 10% of global economic income and 9% of employment. However, if this rapidly growing sector remains ecologically unmanaged, it could cause significant damage to various recreation zones. To mitigate these risks, innovative solutions and development plans must be implemented (Ruano, 2014).

One of the most effective strategies for tourism development involves harmonizing personal and public interests. Analyzing risks for the territory and effectively leveraging regional potential are crucial factors in ensuring sustainable growth (Kazmina et al., 2023).

The following factors should be considered when establishing a tourist infrastructure in recreation areas:

- Identification of natural resources that are unsuitable for use in the area;
- Evaluation of changes in the natural landscape and optimization of the environment;
- Assessment of anthropogenic risks and environmental sustainability;
- Development of tourism routes and establishment of regulations for territory use;
- Evaluation of the ecological and economic sustainability of the land base for future development (Podkovyrova et al., 2023).

The development of recreation zones results in changes to the urban landscape (Voitechovsky, 2018). Assessing the level of development of recreational facilities, particularly parks, in various urban zones can provide valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions of the city.

Different approaches can be proposed for the development of recreation and

tourism in parks and reserves. A comprehensive plan involving a variety of measures can help minimize environmental damage and promote sustainable development. It is crucial to understand the interaction between tourism, recreation areas, and the environment.

The following six proposals have been made for managing solid waste disposal in recreational areas:

1. Waste prevention;
2. Recycling;
3. Processing of recyclable waste;
4. Management of food waste;
5. Ensuring waste is sent to licensed waste management companies;
6. Installation of information boards for both employees and visitors and

directing food scraps to animal shelters (Doğan et al., 2023).

It is generally more beneficial for individuals residing further away from a park to visit it, compared to those living in closer proximity. In parks, the most active areas tend to be the walking paths and children's zones. A consistent flow of visitors is typically observed in parks that feature aesthetically pleasing designs and functional zones that cater to comfort and accessibility (Parks & Recreation in Underserved Areas, report).

The location of historical zones within varying relief terrains has a direct impact on the development of recreation zones, including parks. To ensure the tourism potential and long-term sustainability of these areas, the relief factor must be considered at every stage of planning and development. If later-stage functional zones and structures are incorporated into the plan, the relationship between the terrain and climate is often overlooked as a key consideration.

At the planning or reconstruction stage of recreation zone development, the degree of terrain sharpness plays a critical role. It influences the functionality of the area, facilitates future expansion of the zones, and ensures the safe design of architectural structures of varying purposes within the area (Salimov et al., 2023).

A survey was conducted among the residents of the city, with a total of 100 respondents, consisting of 80 women and 20 men, aged between 17 and 60. The following questions were posed to the participants:

1. During which season do you visit the parks most frequently?
2. What time of day do you typically visit the parks?
3. Which parks, as part of the interior and surrounding design of Icheri Sheher (a list of park names was provided to respondents for selection), do you visit most often?
4. Do the recreation zones reflect and support the historical architectural style of Icheri Sheher?

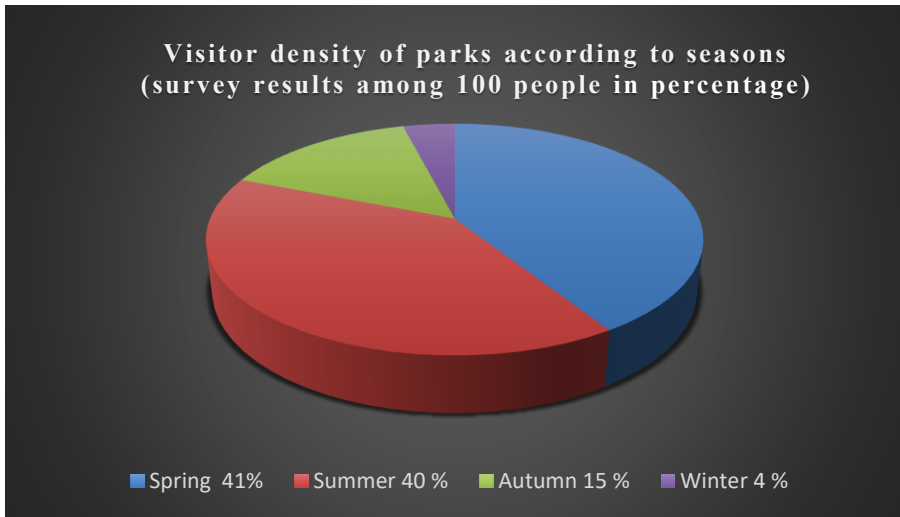
Based on the survey responses, the following results were obtained:

- 41 respondents indicated that they prefer to visit recreation zones (parks) in the spring, 40 in the summer, 15 in the autumn, and 4 in the winter (Figure 3).
- Regarding the time of day, 6 respondents chose the time interval of 7:00-11:00, 47 selected the interval of 12:00-17:00, and 47 chose the interval of 18:00-22:00. Therefore, it can be concluded that the parks are most frequently visited in the afternoon and evening (Figure 4).

The preferences for recreation zones included in the inner and surrounding composition of Icherisheher, as reported by 100 respondents, are as follows (Figure 5):

- A. Philharmonic Garden - 37 respondents
- B. Garden named after B.M.A. Sabir - 7 respondents
- C. Nizami Garden - 19 respondents
- D. A. Azimzade Garden - 4 respondents
- E. Fountain Square - 28 respondents
- F. Garden of White Lilies - 5 respondents

Regarding the question of whether the parks support the historical architectural style of Icherisheher, 76 respondents answered "yes," while 24 answered "no."



*Figure 3. Visitor density of parks located in Icherisheher*

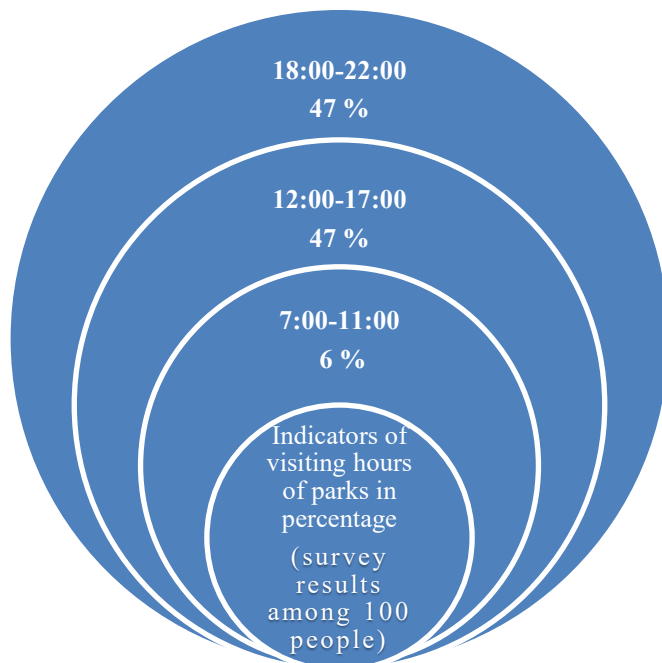
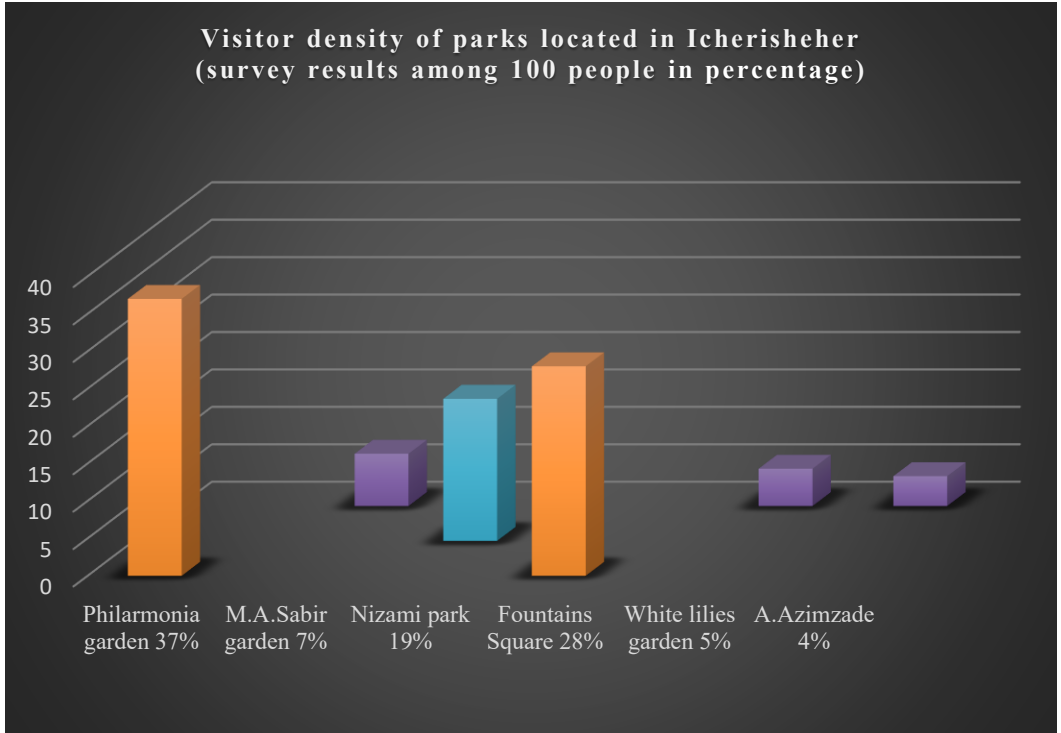


Figure 4. Visitor density of parks according to seasons



*Figure 5. Indicators of visiting hours of parks in percentage*

#### 4. Conclusion

The expansive National Seaside Boulevard, which was not included in the survey due to its location and area, complements the grandeur of the Icherisheher ensemble and its surroundings. Based on the survey of recreation zones surrounding the Icherisheher ensemble and my personal observations as a city resident, the following conclusions can be made:

- Visitor density in recreation areas is notably higher during the spring and summer months. Therefore, it is essential to create well-organized zones for managing visitor flow in these parks and gardens, considering the historical value and composition of the area, regardless of weather conditions.

- Visits are most frequent in the afternoon and evening. To enhance the comfort of visitors during these times, the compositional structure and lighting systems should be adapted to meet environmental requirements.

- The three recreation zones with the highest visitor density in and around the historical center are the Philharmonic Garden, the Nizami Garden, and the Fountain Square. These are interconnected schematically. Two of these zones (Philharmonic and Nizami Gardens) are situated on steep terrain. It is important to ensure accessible movement for people with varying health conditions in these areas. The sharp gradient between Nizami Garden and Fountain Square could be mitigated with the use of mobile devices to ease the transition.

➤ The residents of the city have affirmed the functional role of the mentioned recreation zones in contributing to the overall composition of Icherisheher. At present, the priority is to preserve the historical value of the area when organizing the future development plan for these parks.

The proposed structure for the generalized development concept in both historical centers – Icherisheher and Avanos is outlined as follows:

One of the primary considerations in the development of a sustainable plan is considering the unique and characteristic features of existing recreation zones in the historical centers of both cities.

The action plan for the development of the historical center should integrate the project proposals of contemporary urban planners and restoration architects.

In the planning of both cities, natural geometric forms have been appropriately utilized. The historical and architectural structure of Avanos, located in the Kızılırmak region, is defined by the hydrographic structure and terrain, while the Old Town ensemble's structure is shaped by the relief layers of the area.

Key factors to be considered during the design phase for the sustainable development of these areas, particularly the recreation zones, include the preservation of panoramic views that contribute to compositional integrity, as well as ensuring the multifunctionality of new zones wherever feasible.

The use of areas of historical and architectural significance of cities is the most natural right of people with disabilities. The primary issue in these areas is the presence of ramps with the correct degree of calculation without harming the architectural features. Another very important point is the presence of information boards on the road to historical monuments and directly next to these monuments. More broadly, audio and mobile guides that have started working with the help of modern technologies can make the movement of people with disabilities quite comfortable. If guides working in historical monuments receive training in this direction, the process will be more comfortable.

By allocating special spaces in such historical zones and organizing master classes, the socialization of people with disabilities can be further facilitated.

Regardless of which zone of the city it is, ensuring the comfort of people with disabilities should be one of the most important points of urban planning rules.

➤ Given the significance of the historical and architectural monuments in both cities, it is crucial to ensure that the preservation of this heritage is integrated into the overall urban development strategy. The historical centers of both cities, surrounded by administrative buildings, hold considerable cultural value. If new constructions are planned around the boundaries of the historical center, special care must be taken to protect the integrity of the existing historical ensemble. Failure to consider these factors could negatively impact the structure of historical buildings and potentially compromise the historical character of the city center in the future.

➤ Before drafting the development plan for the recreation zones within the historical center, it is essential to prepare a reference plan, a comprehensive list, and a historical overview of the architectural monuments within the complex. No new architectural projects included in the development plan should obstruct views or create barriers to movement between historical buildings and the surrounding recreational spaces.

➤ A priority issue is ensuring the accessibility of all functional zones, particularly recreational areas, for individuals with physical disabilities in the historical city centers. The proposal plan for the initial project phase should include inclusive zones, designated pathways for people with disabilities, and appropriate lighting arrangements. Subsequently, the introduction of mobile devices with functional significance can be considered to further improve accessibility.

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