

ICCAUA Proceedings Journal

Proceedings of the international conference of contemporary affairs in architecture and urbanism-ICCAUA
Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2026, 2610487

ICCAUA
Proceedings *Journal*
<https://journal.iccaua.com/>

Journal homepage: <https://journal.iccaua.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38027/ICCAUA2026EN0487>

Caravanserais and Urbanization in Anatolia: Spatial and Functional Perspectives

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Abstract

Received: 21.04.2026
Revised: 22.06.2026
Accepted: 01.07.2026
Available online: 10.07.2026

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This article has been selected and peer-reviewed for publication in this journal as part of the 9th International Conference of Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism, held on 7–8 May 2026 in Istanbul, Türkiye.

Caravanserais are among the most significant architectural structures that emerged with the development of historical trade routes. Initially constructed to provide accommodation, security, and commercial services for merchants and travelers, they played an important role in the economic and spatial organization of settlements. However, as trade systems evolved and urbanization processes accelerated, caravanserais underwent significant spatial and functional transformations. The construction of these structures, which began in the 8th century and continued until the 20th century, reflects their long-standing contribution to the socio-economic development of Anatolia. This study examines the relationship between caravanserais and urbanization in Anatolia from spatial and functional perspectives. It explores how urban growth, changing commercial activities, and the expansion of urban centers influenced the location, spatial organization, scale, and functions of caravanserais over time. Attention is given to the transformation of these structures from facilities serving trade routes into components of urban commercial and social life. Based on selected examples from Anatolia, the study evaluates the interaction between caravanserais and the urban fabric, highlighting their role in the formation and development of urban commercial spaces. The findings suggest that caravanserais should be understood not only as elements of transportation and trade networks but also as integral components of urbanization. In this context, the study contributes to a broader understanding of caravanserais' role in shaping the spatial and functional development of Anatolian cities.

Keywords: Urbanization; Caravanserai; Urban Fabric; Spatial Transformation; Functional Transformation

1. Introduction

Urbanization processes involve not only the development of new settlements but also the transformation of existing urban structures and historic environments (Gamboa, 2015). As cities expand, commercial systems evolve, and transportation technologies advance, historic commercial buildings must adapt to new spatial and functional conditions. Among these structures, caravanserais have been directly influenced by changing economic and urban dynamics throughout history (Alsubeh, 2018). The ability of cities to maintain their unique identities largely depends on the preservation of their historical and architectural heritage. Furthermore, ensuring that new developments and urban interventions are planned in harmony with the existing historic fabric is essential for sustaining the distinctive character of cities (Warnaby, 2009; Kropf, 1996).

The physical character of urban space is shaped by architectural features, the position of buildings within the urban skyline, their relationship with the street network, and surrounding environmental elements (Al-Sayed & Turner, 2012). In this context, caravanserais in Anatolian cities should be considered not only as individual architectural monuments but also as important components of urban identity that interact with surrounding commercial areas and public spaces. Understanding the effects of spatial and functional transformations on the original character of these structures is crucial for developing sustainable approaches to conserving historic environments.

Particularly during the last century, rapid urbanization in Anatolian cities has significantly altered the location and functions of historic commercial buildings. Caravanserais, originally positioned at strategic points along transportation routes, have gradually become embedded in expanding urban fabrics and have acquired new functions in response to changing economic conditions. This transformation requires caravanserais to be examined not merely as historic commercial structures but also as urban elements shaped by the dynamics of urbanization.

This study aims to investigate the spatial and functional transformations of caravanserais within the context of urbanization processes in Anatolia. The primary objective is to identify changes in the location, spatial organization, and usage patterns of caravanserais and to evaluate how these changes relate to the evolving urban fabric. Through selected case studies from various Anatolian cities, the study analyzes the historical transformation of caravanserais and examines their relationship to urban development.

The article consists of six sections. Following the introduction, the second section discusses the relationship between urbanization and historic environments. The third section examines the historical development of caravanserais in

Anatolia. The fourth section evaluates the spatial and functional impacts of urbanization on caravanserais. The fifth section presents analyses based on selected case studies, while the final section discusses the findings and provides conclusions and recommendations.

2. Background

The conservation of historic environments and their integration into contemporary urban life have become central concerns in modern planning and conservation approaches. Over time, conservation theory has evolved to recognize historic structures not merely as physical remnants of the past but as significant elements representing urban identity and historical continuity (Karthik, 2017). This perspective advocates that new urban interventions should be implemented without compromising the original character of historic environments and that a balance should be maintained between conservation and development (Loes et al., 2013). Today, the preservation of structures possessing architectural, historical, and cultural significance is considered essential not only for the sustainability of cultural heritage but also for guiding urban development and maintaining urban identity (Feilden, 2003; Oppong et al., 2018).

According to Keleş (2021), urbanization is the process through which the number of cities increases, urban areas expand, and urban lifestyles and behavioral patterns become widespread as a result of industrialization and economic development. While this process generates significant changes in the physical structure of cities, it also requires historic environments and cultural heritage assets to adapt to changing urban conditions.

Particularly during periods of rapid urbanization, the reorganization of economic activities, the development of transportation networks, and changes in land-use decisions directly affect the spatial locations and functions of historic structures. The preservation of historic environments within urban development processes is important not only for maintaining architectural heritage but also for sustaining urban identity and collective memory (Sennett, 2013).

Urbanization in Türkiye remained relatively limited during the early Republican period but accelerated significantly after the 1950s due to economic and demographic transformations. Intensive rural-to-urban migration, driven by industrialization policies, resulted in rapid population growth and urban expansion. This process substantially altered the physical structure of cities while creating various pressures on existing historic environments and cultural heritage assets. As cities expanded, traditional urban fabrics underwent transformation, and historic structures began to acquire new functions in response to changing economic and social conditions. Historic commercial buildings, in particular, represent some of the most visible spatial elements reflecting the impacts of urbanization (Akalp, 2024). The development of caravanserais in Anatolia is closely associated with urbanization processes and the spatial transformation of settlements. Initially located along intercity routes, these structures primarily served as secure accommodation facilities and provided basic services for travelers (İlter, 1969). However, as cities expanded and populations grew, caravanserais gradually became integrated into the urban fabric (Erdmann, 1961; Kuban, 2007). This process directly influenced their spatial organization, locational characteristics, and architectural features.

As a result of urbanization, some caravanserais were incorporated into city centers, experienced increased surrounding development, and established stronger ties to urban life. Therefore, the historical development of caravanserais should be evaluated not only through architectural changes but also within the broader context of urban growth processes and evolving urban Dynamics (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Stages of Urbanization.

The urbanization process influenced the plan schemes, spatial organization, and architectural characteristics of caravanserais, resulting in distinct architectural features across periods. Initially designed as enclosed and defensive structures, caravanserais gradually became integrated into the urban fabric as cities expanded, undergoing transformations shaped by surrounding developments.

Therefore, the historical development of caravanserais should be evaluated not only through architectural changes but also within the framework of the spatial and social transformations generated by urbanization (Aslanapa, 2007). As a result of urban growth, caravanserais evolved beyond their original role as accommodation facilities and became important urban elements integrated into the economic and social structure of their surroundings.

Particularly with the expansion of city centers, some caravanserais became focal points of surrounding development and played a significant role in shaping the urban fabric (Kuban, 2007). Architecturally, courtyards, arcades, monumental portals, accommodation units, and service spaces constituted the primary components of these structures, while construction materials generally comprised stone, brick, and rubble masonry systems, depending on regional conditions (Erdmann, 1961).

Overall, the development of caravanserais in Anatolia should be considered not merely an architectural evolution but also a phenomenon shaped by urbanization, transportation networks, and broader spatial transformations. By adapting to changing urban dynamics throughout history, these structures have become important components of the cultural heritage of Anatolian cities (Kuban, 2007).

3. Materials and Methods

The materials of this study consist of national and international academic publications, historical documents, archival records, photographs, and related literature concerning urbanization, cultural heritage, historic environments, and caravanserais. The theoretical framework of the research was established on studies examining the relationship between urbanization and cultural heritage, as well as sources on the historical development of caravanserais in Anatolia. Within the scope of the study, caravanserais located in different Anatolian cities were selected as case studies. The selected caravanserais were chosen because they represent different geographical regions of Anatolia and provide distinct examples of spatial transformation in the context of urbanization. El Aman Caravanserai in Bitlis is a structure that experienced functional decline as a result of the relocation of urban centers over time. Alara Han in Antalya exemplifies caravanserais that have lost their original functions due to changes in transportation routes, yet largely preserve their architectural integrity. İpek Han in Bursa represents structures that have remained in use by integrating into the historic urban center during urbanization, whereas Hasan Paşa Hanı in Diyarbakır exemplifies caravanserais that continue to function actively within the historic urban fabric and remain integrated into contemporary urban life. These structures were also selected because they represent the eastern, western, southern, and southeastern regions of Anatolia, were constructed during different historical periods, and demonstrate varying impacts of urbanization on historic structures. This selection enabled a comparative evaluation of the spatial and functional consequences of urbanization on caravanserais.

The case studies were chosen specifically to assess the spatial and functional impacts of urbanization on historic commercial structures. A qualitative research approach was adopted, employing literature review, historical assessment, and comparative analysis methods. In the first stage, sources related to urbanization, its impacts on historic environments, and the historical development of caravanserais were examined.

In the second stage, the locations and transformations of caravanserais within urbanization processes in Anatolia were evaluated. In the final stage, the selected case studies were comparatively analyzed to identify the effects of urbanization on the spatial organization and functions of caravanserais. The research was structured around three main themes: the impacts of urbanization on historic commercial structures, the relationship between caravanserais and the urban fabric, and the functional transformations that have occurred over time.

Based on the findings, the transformation of caravanserais during urbanization was evaluated, and the contemporary role of these structures in modern cities was discussed (Figure 2).

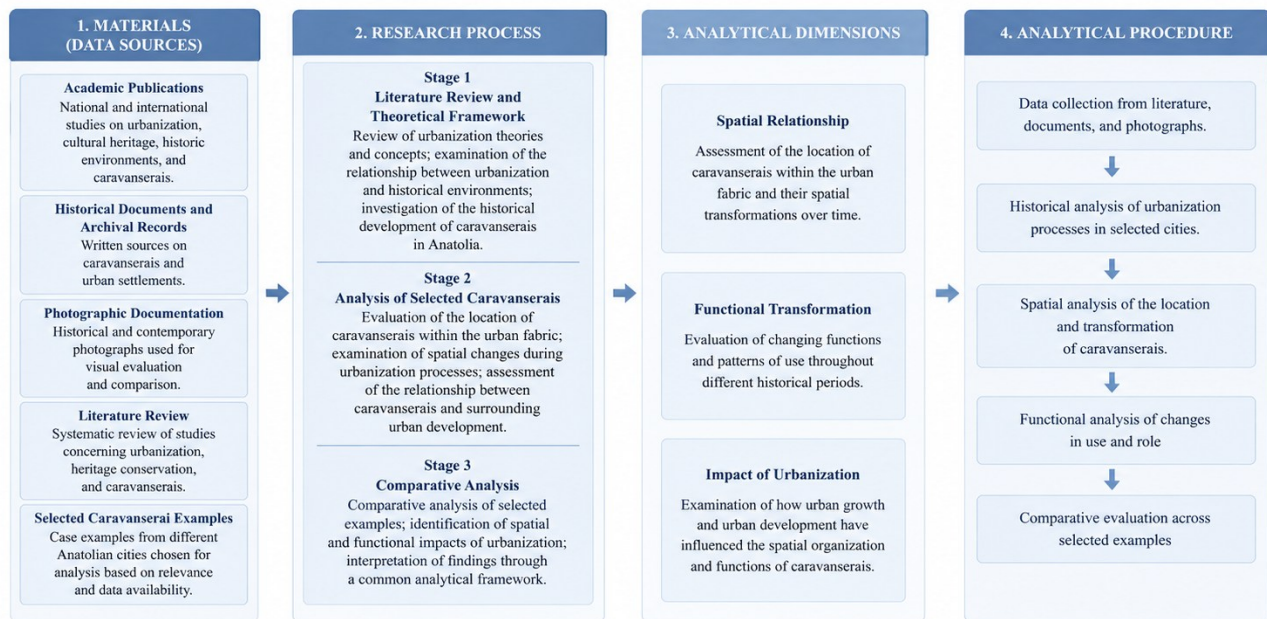


Figure 2. Methodological framework of the study.

3. Findings

To examine the impacts of urbanization on caravanserais, this study selected caravanserais constructed between the 13th and 20th centuries that are currently located within urban centers or have become integrated into the contemporary urban fabric. An examination of the historical development of caravanserais in Anatolia reveals that numerous examples were constructed across different periods and geographical regions. Caravanserais built during the Seljuk, Anatolian Seljuk, Early Ottoman, and Late Ottoman periods exhibit distinct spatial characteristics shaped by the socioeconomic conditions and settlement patterns of their respective eras. These structures provide important evidence for understanding how urbanization processes have influenced the spatial organization, functional transformation, and urban integration of historic commercial buildings over time (Figure 3).

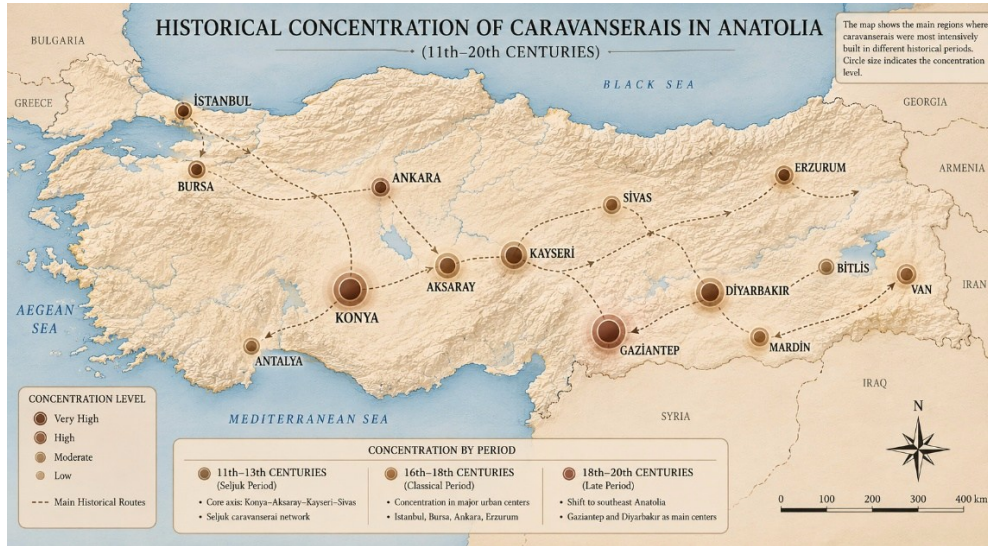


Figure 3. Historical Concentration of Caravanserai in Anatolia.

Urbanization in Türkiye gained significant momentum, particularly after the 1950s, driven by population movements, economic transformations, and the development of transportation networks. During this period, rapid population growth led to the expansion of urban areas, the restructuring of city centers, and increasing development pressures on historic environments. Urbanization involved not only the concentration of population in cities but also the transformation of urban spatial organization, transportation systems, and the position of cultural heritage assets within the urban fabric. The continuous increase in urbanization rates since the mid-twentieth century has altered the original context of many historic structures and exposed them to new urban dynamics.

One of the building types most affected by this transformation is the caravanserai. Originally constructed as important stopping points for transportation, mobility, and accommodation between settlements, caravanserais experienced various transformations as cities expanded, transportation routes changed, and settlement patterns evolved. While some caravanserais remained within urban centers and became integrated into urban life, others lost their original functions due to shifts in urban centers or changes in transportation networks. Consequently, caravanserais provide valuable case studies for examining the spatial and functional impacts of urbanization on historic structures. To evaluate these effects, caravanserais from different regions of Anatolia and historical periods were selected and analyzed comparatively. El Aman Caravanserai in Bitlis, in Eastern Anatolia, was originally built during the Seljuk period along an important transportation corridor and served as a major hub for regional mobility. However, as urban development shifted toward different parts of the city and transportation networks changed, the structure lost its original function and is now largely inactive.

Similarly, Alara Han in the Mediterranean Region was built during the Anatolian Seljuk period along a strategic transportation route and served as an important accommodation facility for regional mobility. Although it has lost its original function due to changes in transportation systems and urban development patterns, it has largely preserved its architectural integrity and remains a significant cultural heritage monument of the Anatolian Seljuk period.

In contrast, İpek Han in Bursa, in the Marmara Region, is a caravanserai that successfully adapted to urban growth. Situated within the historic city center, the structure became integrated into the expanding urban fabric as Bursa developed into a major urban center. Despite intensive surrounding development and commercial activity, İpek Han continues to function and retain its historical significance and role within the city's urban identity.

Likewise, Hasan Paşa Hanı in Diyarbakır, in the Southeastern Anatolia Region, occupies a central position in the city's historic commercial core. As Diyarbakır expanded, the structure became fully integrated into the urban fabric and continues to serve commercial and tourism-related functions. This example demonstrates that urbanization does not necessarily produce negative impacts on historic structures; under appropriate conditions, it can also contribute to their preservation, adaptation, and continued use.

Table 1. Effects of Urbanization on Selected Caravanserais in Anatolia.

Caravanserai	City	Region	Period	Original Characteristics	Location	Impact of Urbanization	Current Status	Photograph
El Aman Caravanserai	Bitlis	Eastern Anatolia	Seljuk Period	Located on an important intercity route outside the urban core		Urban center shifted away from the structure; loss of original function	Underutilized / Inactive	
Alara Han	Antalya	Mediterranean	Seljuk Period	Located on a strategic transportation corridor connecting coastal and inland areas		Changes in transportation networks reduced its functional importance	Preserved as cultural heritage	

İpek Han	Bursa	Marmara	Ottoman Period	Located within the historical center	Integrated into the expanding urban fabric and commercial activities	Active use/ Different function	
Hasan Paşa Hanı	Diyarbakır	Southeastern Anatolia	Ottoman Period	Located within the historic city center	Became integrated with urban growth and maintained its central role	Active use/ Different function	

Overall, it can be argued that urbanization processes across Anatolia have followed similar developmental trajectories. However, the impacts of urbanization on caravanserais have varied considerably. Structures that became disconnected from urban centers or lost their relationship with major transportation networks experienced functional decline and, in some cases, abandonment. In contrast, caravanserais that remained within urban centers and were able to adapt to changing urban demands have largely maintained their relevance and continued to function within contemporary urban life. These findings demonstrate that the long-term survival of caravanserais is closely related to their ability to remain integrated with evolving urban dynamics and spatial development patterns (Figure 4).

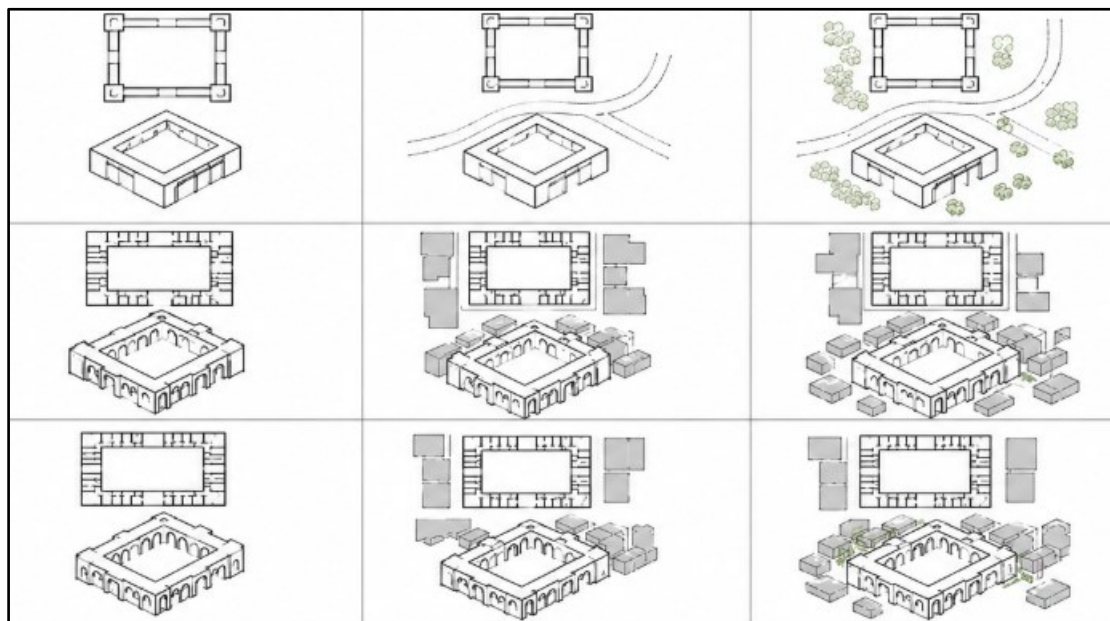


Figure 4. Transformation of the Urban Position of Caravanserais under Urbanization Processes.

This finding highlights that the conservation of caravanserais should be evaluated not only at the scale of individual buildings but also within the broader context of urbanization and urban development dynamics. The selected examples demonstrate that urbanization does not exert a uniform impact on historic structures. While urban growth has led some caravanserais to lose their original functions and become disconnected from their urban context, it has enabled others to remain integrated into the urban fabric and continue to serve contemporary needs. Although numerous caravanserais with similar characteristics exist across Anatolia, the structures selected for this study were chosen because they represent different historical periods, geographical regions, and patterns of transformation resulting from urbanization. Consequently, the spatial and functional impacts of urbanization on caravanserais were evaluated comparatively.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that urbanization has had significant spatial and functional impacts on caravanserais in Anatolian cities. Historically constructed as important nodes within intercity transportation and trade networks, caravanserais have been increasingly influenced by changing urban dynamics as cities expanded and economic structures evolved. As a result, the spatial positions of these structures within cities, their relationships with surrounding environments, and their functional roles have changed over time.

The effects of urbanization on historic environments have been widely discussed in the literature. Keleş (2023) argues that urbanization should not be understood solely as population growth and spatial expansion but rather as a multidimensional process that transforms economic and social structures. Similarly, Tekeli (2011) emphasizes that historic buildings may assume new roles in response to changing urban conditions throughout urban development processes. The findings of the present study support these perspectives by demonstrating that caravanserais have undergone significant transformations in response to changing economic, spatial, and social conditions associated with urbanization (Figure 5).

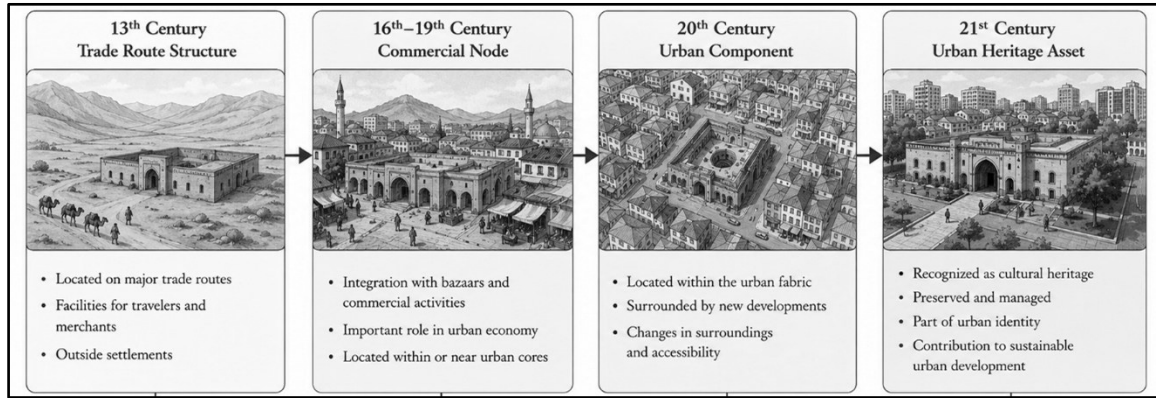


Figure 5. Main impacts of urbanization on historic structures.

In the case studies examined, many caravanserais that were originally located along intercity routes or at the periphery of settlements have gradually become incorporated into urban centers as cities expanded. As urban growth progressed, these structures became integrated with commercial districts, marketplaces, and emerging transportation networks, allowing them to assume new roles within the urban economy. This transformation illustrates that caravanserais should not be viewed solely as components of historical transportation and trade systems but also as urban structures that reflect broader urbanization processes. Their changing spatial relationships with surrounding urban development demonstrate how historic buildings can adapt to evolving urban conditions while continuing to contribute to the social and economic life of cities (Figure 6).

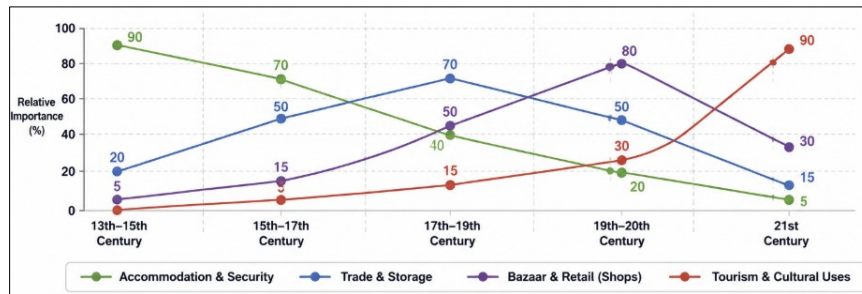


Figure 6. The Effects of Urbanization on the Functional Transformation of Caravanserais.

However, the pressures generated by urbanization on historic environments should also be acknowledged. Increasing building density, transportation investments, and changing land-use patterns have contributed to the deterioration of the historic context surrounding some caravanserais. Orbaşlı (2008) emphasizes that the conservation of historic environments should extend beyond individual structures and include the broader urban context in which they are situated. The findings of this study support this perspective, demonstrating that the historical significance of caravanserais cannot be evaluated independently of their spatial and environmental relationships. In many cases, the preservation of these structures depends not only on maintaining their physical integrity but also on sustaining the historic urban fabric and spatial connections that contribute to their cultural significance (Figure 7).

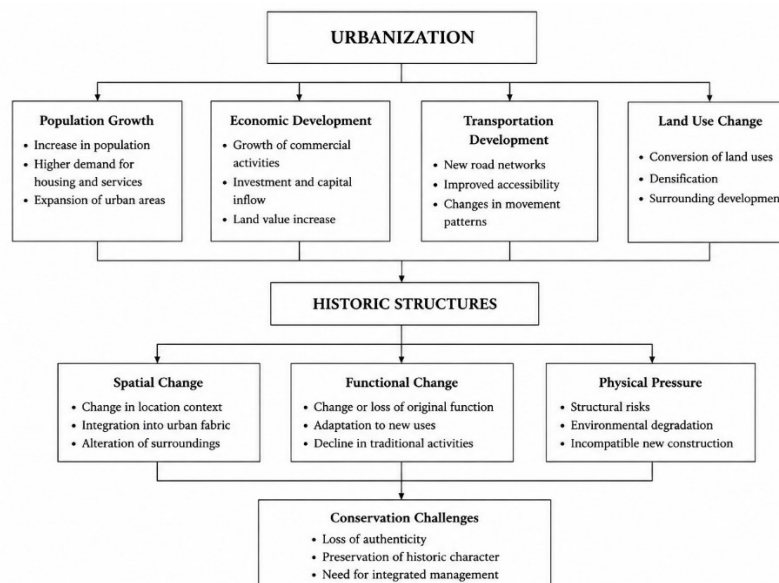


Figure 7. The Relationship Between Urbanization and Historic Built Heritage.

In conclusion, urbanization has not only produced physical changes in caravanserais but has also reshaped their functions, economic roles, and spatial relationships within cities. Therefore, conservation approaches should extend beyond the scale of individual buildings and consider caravanserais within the broader context of historic urban fabrics, commercial districts, and urban development processes.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the effects of urbanization processes on the physical characteristics, spatial organization, and functional use of caravanserais in Anatolian cities and revealed that these historic commercial structures have been continuously reshaped by changing urban dynamics over time. The findings indicate that caravanserais were originally designed as accommodation and security facilities serving transportation and trade routes; however, with the growth of cities and the transformation of economic activities, they gradually became integral components of the urban fabric. Particularly, those located within urban centers have acquired new functions related to commerce, storage, production, cultural activities, and tourism. While this transformation has contributed to the continued use and survival of many structures, it has also, in some cases, weakened their original spatial characteristics and historical identity.

The study further demonstrates that urbanization has influenced not only the physical form of caravanserais but also their functional identity. Changes in transportation systems, the restructuring of commercial networks, and increasing economic pressures within urban centers have altered the ways in which many caravanserais are used. Consequently, some structures have successfully adapted through new functions, whereas others have lost their original purpose entirely or become disconnected from their historic context due to intensive surrounding development.

In this regard, conservation approaches should not be limited to preserving individual buildings. Caravanserais should be evaluated together with the historic commercial districts, bazaars, street patterns, and urban environments in which they are embedded. The sustainable conservation of these structures requires the development of policies that are compatible with urbanization processes and adaptive reuse strategies that prioritize their historical and architectural values. Ultimately, although urbanization and economic development are inevitable processes, the findings suggest that they do not necessarily conflict with the conservation of historic commercial structures. With appropriate planning and conservation strategies, caravanserais can preserve their historical identity while simultaneously adapting to contemporary urban life. Therefore, local authorities, conservation professionals, urban planners, and other stakeholders should collaborate to develop integrated conservation approaches that safeguard the historical significance of caravanserais while ensuring their continued integration into urban life. Through such approaches, caravanserais can be passed down to future generations not merely as remnants of past trade networks but as significant urban heritage assets that reflect the historical continuity and cultural identity of Anatolian cities.

Acknowledgements

The author declares that no non-authorial support was received during the preparation of this study.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) report no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study were obtained through a comprehensive literature review, historical documents, academic publications, maps, photographs, and secondary sources related to selected caravanserais in Anatolia. The spatial and functional transformations of caravanserais within the urbanization process were examined through historical and comparative analyses. Supporting materials and additional documentation used in the study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for this study, as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data.

CRedit Author Statement

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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