

SYRIA

Damascus: a Major Eastern Mediterranean Site at Risk

Damascus, the political and cultural centre of the present-day Arabic Republic of Syria, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. For many centuries it was the centre of the Syrian region (comprising modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan) and over several thousand years one of the main cities in the Middle East. Between 661 and 750 AD it became the capital of the Umayyad world empire – the first Islamic dynasty – that stretched from Gibraltar to the Oxus and Indus rivers. The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus (706-715), one of the oldest and most important mosques in the Islamic world, is still an impressive monument of that time. Different rulers, governors, notables and other individuals added masterpieces of Islamic architecture to the urban fabric of the city throughout its history. The city also contains many remains from the Classical period.

The majority of public and private buildings in the Old City, nearly all commercial buildings and private houses, originate from the Ottoman period (1516-1918). The numerous and very rich houses, as well as the huge bazaar, are impressive monuments of human cultural production. Accordingly, in 1979 the Old City was the first Syrian site to be included on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a site of World Cultural Heritage. This heritage is in great danger.

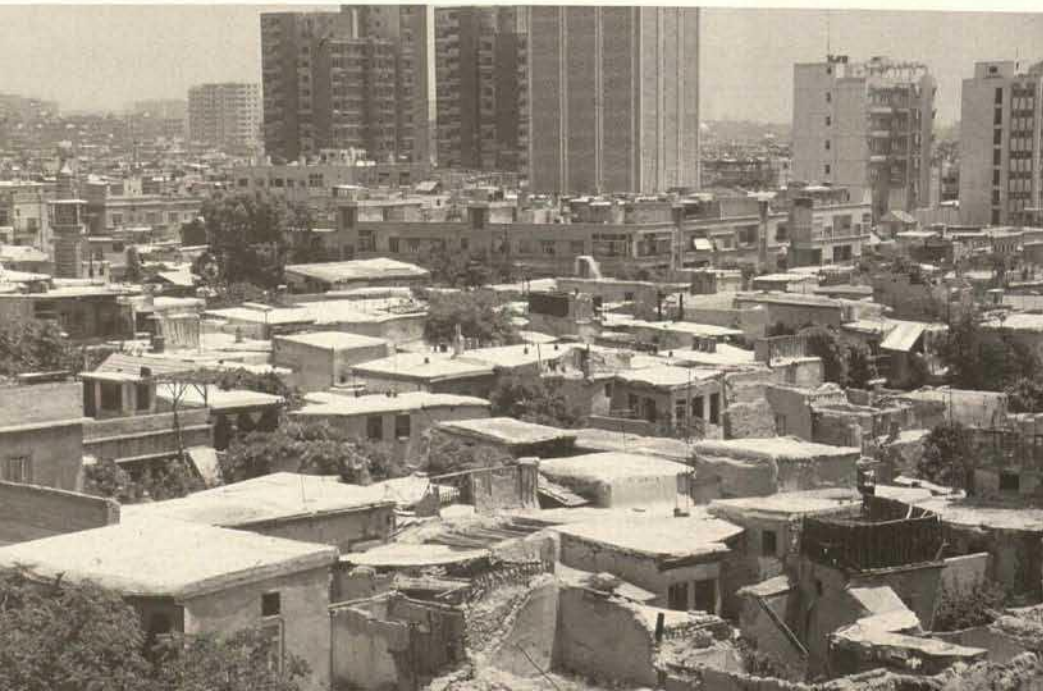
City Planning

The danger for Damascus is in some aspects the same that one can observe all over the world, but with the additional problems particular to urban centres in the Middle East: a desire for rapid investment, and ever mounting demographic pressure. Over many decades of urban planning, big roads and huge concrete buildings have been considered as ends in themselves in the desire to modernise the cityscape. The al-Bahsa quarter, once one of the most important historical neighbourhoods outside the city walls, provides a sad example. It was completely pulled down at the beginning of the 1980s and replaced by large, poorly integrated concrete structures of bad quality, which are today little used despite their location in the middle of the city. Other aspects of urban planning,

such as traffic management, are not very sophisticated and road improvements are currently seen as the only solution to the city's transport problems. The general economic and social crises that are ongoing in countries such as Syria, together with the loss of urban identity caused by extreme social change (the population drift to the cities in so-called 'third world countries') complicates the situation.

Domestic Quarters – the Protection of Coherent Architectural Units

The old city of Damascus preserves large residential quarters that contain not just a puzzle of isolated monuments but a complete historical urban fabric. In 1900 the Ottoman yearbook for the province of Damascus listed 16,832 houses, of which approximately half are still standing. Many houses are outstanding and richly decorated examples of Islamic architecture. In all the eastern Mediterranean – from Egypt to Greece – the Syrian towns of Damascus and Aleppo are the only large cities that preserve domestic architecture on such a scale. Other important cities, such as Cairo and Istanbul have lost practically all their residential architecture and preserved only those buildings considered historical monuments (such as mosques and schools). The idea that these ensembles deserve protection and are of importance as functioning units is still not commonly held. In some quarters, especially outside the city walls, one finds a mess of modern concrete high rises alongside low-level historical buildings of wood, clay and stone. Multi-floor office buildings replace single historical buildings that are of 'less' importance. In this way the historical town centre of Marja Square has lost nearly all its historical substance. At the moment the future of the historic market of al-Khayl and al-Atiq, next to the citadel of Damascus, is under discussion. Scant consideration is given to the idea that not only should the Market be safeguarded, but similar protection should also apply to its wider urban setting as an ensemble with the citadel.



Old town - new town, general view



Situation of a quarter extra-muros



Destruction at the traditional market al-Hal / al-Khayl

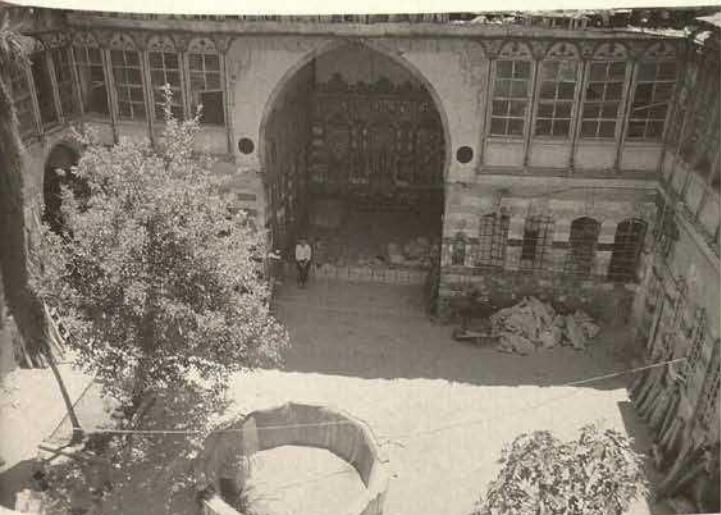


View of the quarter Suq Saruja

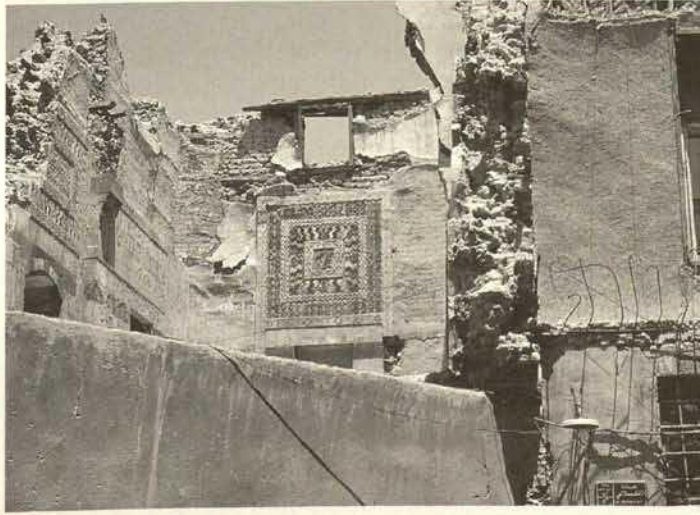


Zuqaq al-Zukhra, extra-muros, destruction of an old quarter for a new hotel

Traditional court-yard house in the old city



Ruin of a 17th-century house intra-muros



Protection Intra Muros – Destruction Extra Muros

One of the main misunderstandings concerning the old town is its division in the two parts, intra and extra muros. From the 12th century, the city grew beyond its walls and during the last centuries of the previous millennium the majority of the city was actually extra muros. Two thirds of the historic houses and many public monuments were located outside the walls. Accordingly the status of World Cultural Heritage site has been given to the entire town. The Syrian administration has unfortunately considered only the quarters intra muros as worthy of safeguarding and has enacted laws and set up a council for protection of only these quarters. The very important extra mural quarters were left vulnerable for the most part to new town planning activity and whole quarters have vanished, such al-Bahsa and parts of Suq Saruja and Midan. The lack of protection given to historic urban extra-mural regions frequently leads to a slow but continuous destruction. This process is very obvious in the quarter of Salihiya / Muhi ad-Din, which dates to the 12th century and is famous for its important role in Islamic intellectual history with its dozens of historic schools. The first multi-storey concrete building has just been erected in the historic market street of as-Salihiya. As a consequence, people living in the surrounding open courtyard houses have started to leave their homes because of the loss of privacy; their open courtyards, which can be seen into from the new much higher building, act as important living areas. Without strict and direct control much of this market street will sooner or later disappear.

A Lack of Technical and Financial Resources

In recent years Damascus has received new attention. Many new restaurants and cafes have opened and the bookshelves in libraries are now filled with nostalgic literature about the old town and traditional life. Some intellectuals, old Damascene families or people from the upper classes have bought old houses. This promising development is still a drop in the ocean when the sheer number of houses is considered. Until now there has been no master plan to protect the quarters inside and outside the walls, and for the local planners the enormous number of buildings is more than they can handle. Human and technical resources are very limited and often there is not sufficient training. Even if some individuals in authority are enthusiastic for the old town, their work is often hindered by the existing circumstances. For example, there is a lack of the necessary technical means of maintaining collected data about the historical structures in an archive. Often traditional construction and decoration methods have been forgotten and inherited local knowledge, developed over hundreds of years, is dying out with the last old craftsmen practising it. Damascus is in urgent need of a training and planning centre that teaches local crafts, restoration and traditional construction methods and has the technical and logistical know-how to help those people who want to engage in restoration.

Misunderstanding Restoration and the Lack of Knowledge

Many house-owners who want to restore their houses or modify them into restaurants simply do not know how to go about doing so. Often they partially destroy the original buildings and reconstruct them according to how they imagine an Arab house should look. Help is needed to guide this very welcome private initiative.

Last year the 19th-century Ottoman hospital of al-Ghuraba was torn down in the name of restoration, in spite of being in very good condition. It is now under complete reconstruction in concrete. It was one of the most important hospitals to be seen anywhere in the Ottoman Empire and its destruction illustrates the idea of restoration often seen in Syria. There are many similar examples in Damascus. Many historic mosques were totally rebuilt according to a modern fantastical style. In particular, the Directorate for Pious Foundations has destroyed or damaged many outstanding architectural monuments of Arab and Islamic history through restoration in recent years. Obviously many craftsmen employed were not specially trained. One of the most dramatic instances was the restoration of the world famous Umayyad mosque (early 8th century) that was built inside the Roman Temple of Jupiter. Roman walls (1st century) were partially deconstructed and rebuilt, Umayyad marble (8th century) was replaced and newly fitted with steel and concrete onto the Roman walls, and Mamluk fountains and interior elements (14th/15th century) were demolished and replaced by modern interpretations. Of course, all these undertakings were not done in order to demolish the monument, but to give it a 'nicer' appearance. The historical monument itself was considered less important than its historical image, and that had to be polished up. The stones do not have an intrinsic historical value but are secondary to the idea of the monument to which they belong.

Hopefully, through the combined efforts of the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities, the Municipality Institutions and local and foreign institutions, some harm that might have been inflicted to the old city can be prevented. In order to save one of the most important and rich urban centres of the eastern Mediterranean much help is needed and the implementation of a large international support programme essential.

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New marble fitted with steel and concrete onto the ancient walls of the Umayyad mosque

