

# The Documentation of the Historic City of Aleppo

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## Abstract

The paper: *The Documentation of the Old City of Aleppo* presents the vision, mission, and results of the multiple projects at the Museum for Islamic Art (Pergamon Museum) in Berlin, which focus on protecting the unique cultural heritage of the Old City of Aleppo. The city was heavily affected by the Syrian armed conflict in the past eight years, by airstrikes and underground tunnel bombing, causing severe damage primarily along the firing line extending from the northwest to southeast axis of the Aleppo Citadel.

The different Aleppo projects developed from the core project: Syrian Heritage Archive Project, depending on the received archival materials from scholars and photographers since 2013. As a natural response to the extent of damage and loss in the old city of Aleppo, it was necessary to include the archive data as a basis to support future reconstruction efforts of the city.

The following projects emerged consequently: Aleppo Built Heritage Documentation Project, Aleppo Heritage Catalogue Project, and Stunde Null: Post-Conflict Recovery of Urban Cultural Heritage – Case Study: Old City of Aleppo (Old Aleppo Neighborhoods Documentation Project). Each project focuses on different aspects which are mainly: a. Documentation, of both the tangible and intangible heritage of the city, b. Damage Assessment of different important historic monuments in Aleppo, and c. Out-Reach Activities, to create a platform for cultural exchange and to include all voices in the discussions of post-war reconstruction of the city.

The presentation will try to explain the methodology, structure and some of the outcomes of the different Aleppo projects with their interdisciplinary and cooperative approach for a scientific and practical inquiry. Eventually, it concludes with challenges and future aspirations of mobilizing the knowledge produced, to become a tool that could assist relevant stakeholders in rebuilding and safeguarding the cultural heritage of Aleppo.

*Figs. 1a, b: Before and after panoramic view of the Old City of Aleppo, in 25.06.2010 and 01.01.2017  
(Photos: Andre Yacoubian)*



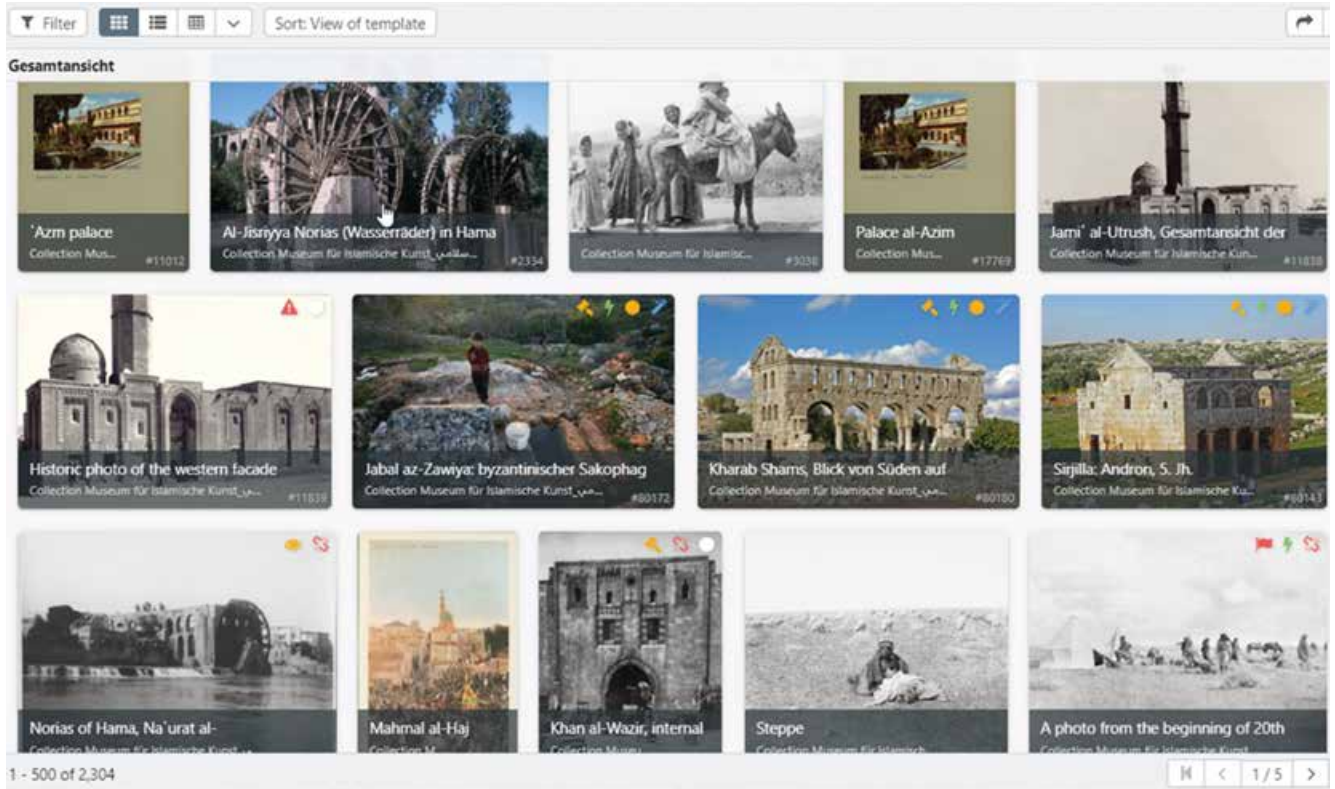


Fig. 2: A screen shot of EasyDB (the online database of SHAP: <https://syrianheritage.gbv.de/>)

Fig. 3: Rubble Management Guidelines: sample of the project's publications (soon to be uploaded online)

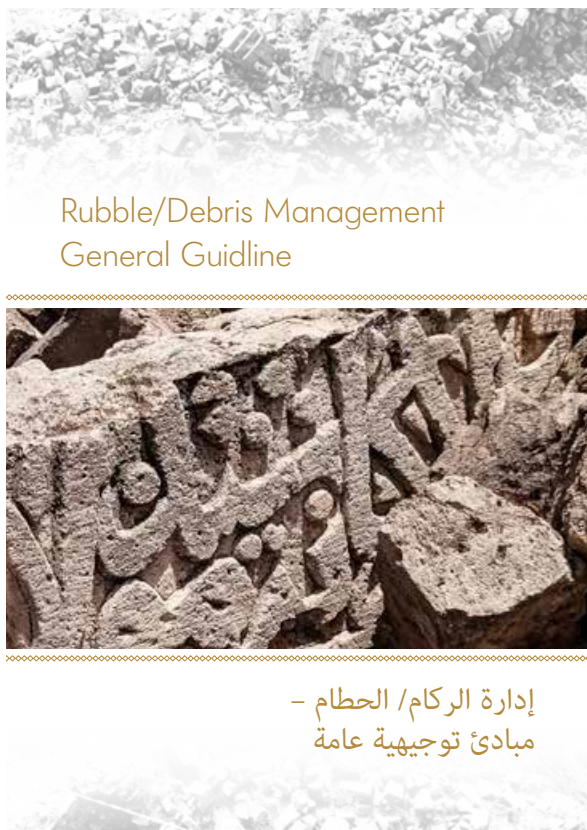
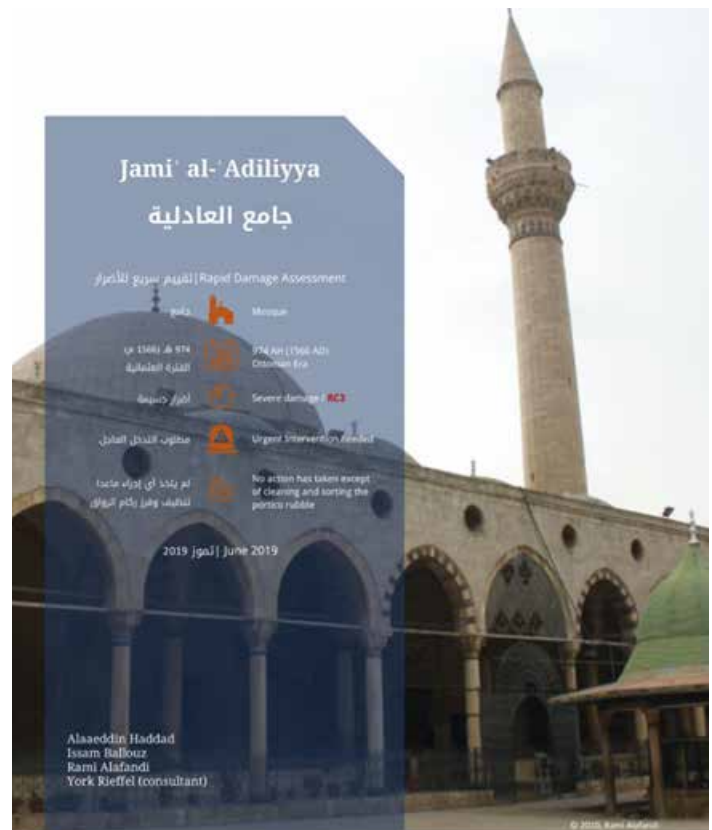


Fig. 4: Rapid damage assessment report of al-Adiliyya mosque, to be downloaded from: [https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/damage\\_assessment?nav\\_id=8568&publication=1](https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/damage_assessment?nav_id=8568&publication=1)





The Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin works on the documentation of the historic city of Aleppo, led by its director Stefan Weber, through multiple initiatives that vary in terms of focus, team, and funding, under one core project: the Syrian Heritage Archive. The projects work jointly by building on and complementing each other's work.

## SHAP – Syrian Heritage Archive Project

What started as a digitisation initiative in 2013, in the face of the escalating war in Syria, when the Museum for Islamic Art (MIK) and the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) in Berlin, decided to take action and start a digital archive for collecting and safeguarding as much information as possible about Syria and its heritage. This archive is now running for its 7<sup>th</sup> year (2020) and acting as a rich data-centre for several initiatives that emerged and grew out of the archive. Focusing on Aleppo with around 35.000 records of places and buildings in the city, mainly before the war, this material constitute the basis and reference for any reconstruction and rebuilding efforts post-war (fig. 2).

For thousands of years, Aleppo was a meeting point for many trade routes, such as the Silk Road, which formed the backbone of the city's economy that can still clearly be traced in the city's souks, khans, street network, fortified gates and citadel. Aleppo is still a living cultural heritage site, where people live, work, and practice their daily lives within the historic multilayered urban fabric. The old city of Aleppo is one of the most severely affected places in Syria because of the war. During the so-called *Aleppo Battle*, between June 2012 and December 2016, four and a half years of active combats and bombing had led to destructions of ancient parts of Aleppo that can be estimated as follow: 14 % fully destroyed; 25 % partially destroyed; 35 % severely

damaged; 16% moderately damaged. Only 10% of build environment remained unharmed, but was still vandalized!

## Aleppo Built Heritage Documentation

The first project that emerged from the archive in 2017 has been monitoring approximately 80 buildings through social media channels and the local community activities. After studying the damages, the team produced reports on 30 buildings which covers the typical damages of Aleppo's historical buildings (fig. 3).

Based on monitoring and collecting information and photos, the project developed a proper methodology for effective documentation and damage assessment for individual buildings, and created a template for rapid assessment building reports. It also produced guidelines for rubble management and documentation, based on specific cases in Aleppo.

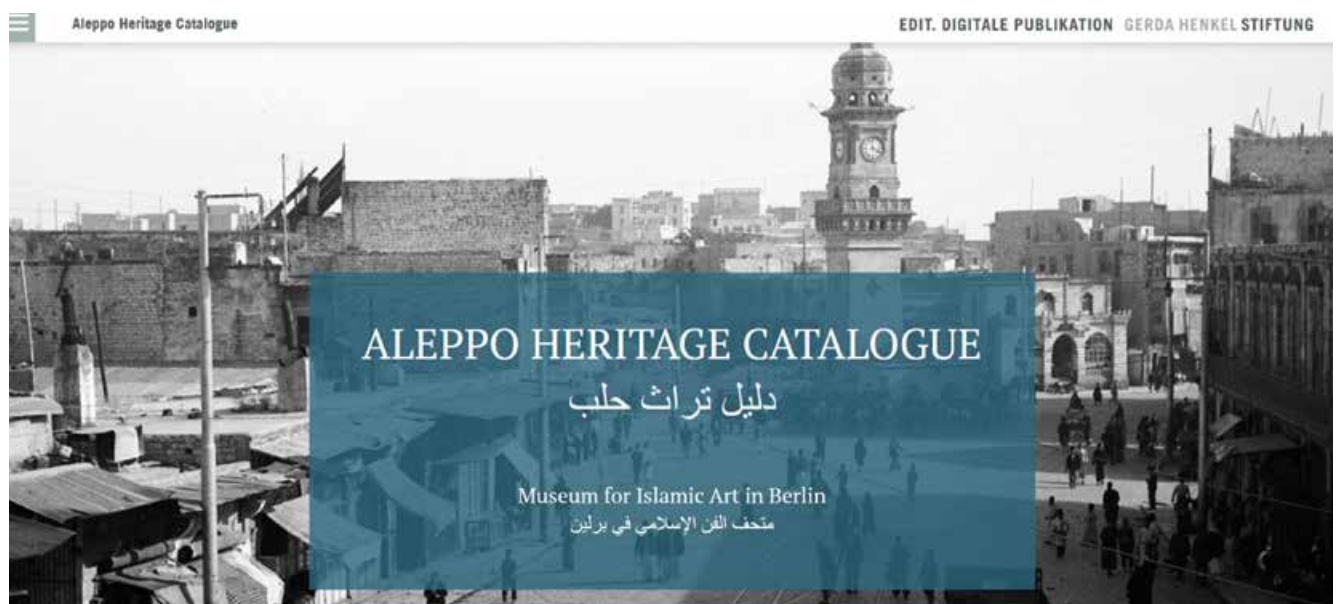
A catalogue of damages was also produced with an illustrated glossary about the impacts of war and deterioration patterns on Aleppo's historical buildings.

In addition, the project prepared and published a looting report for lost polychrome wooden interior decoration from the traditional Ghazala house and shared it with UNESCO for monitoring with Interpol (all materials are available upon request) (fig. 4).

## Aleppo Heritage Catalogue

The results of the first project deemed necessary to talk about the history of those buildings, and hence the Aleppo Heritage Catalogue Project emerged (fig. 5); a documentation of selected monuments in a format of articles in an

Fig. 5: Aleppo Heritage Catalogue (<https://edit.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/aleppo-heritage-catalogue>)



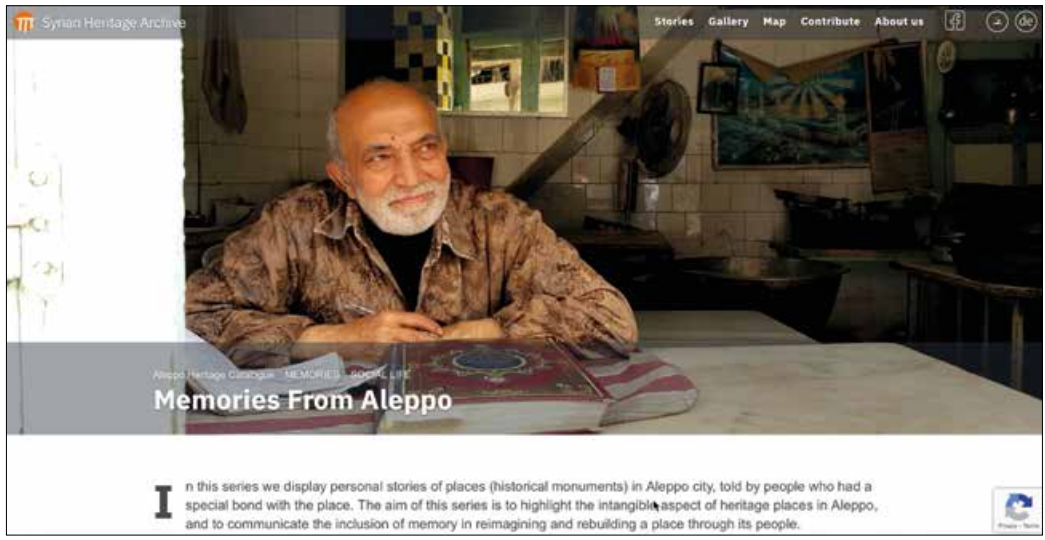


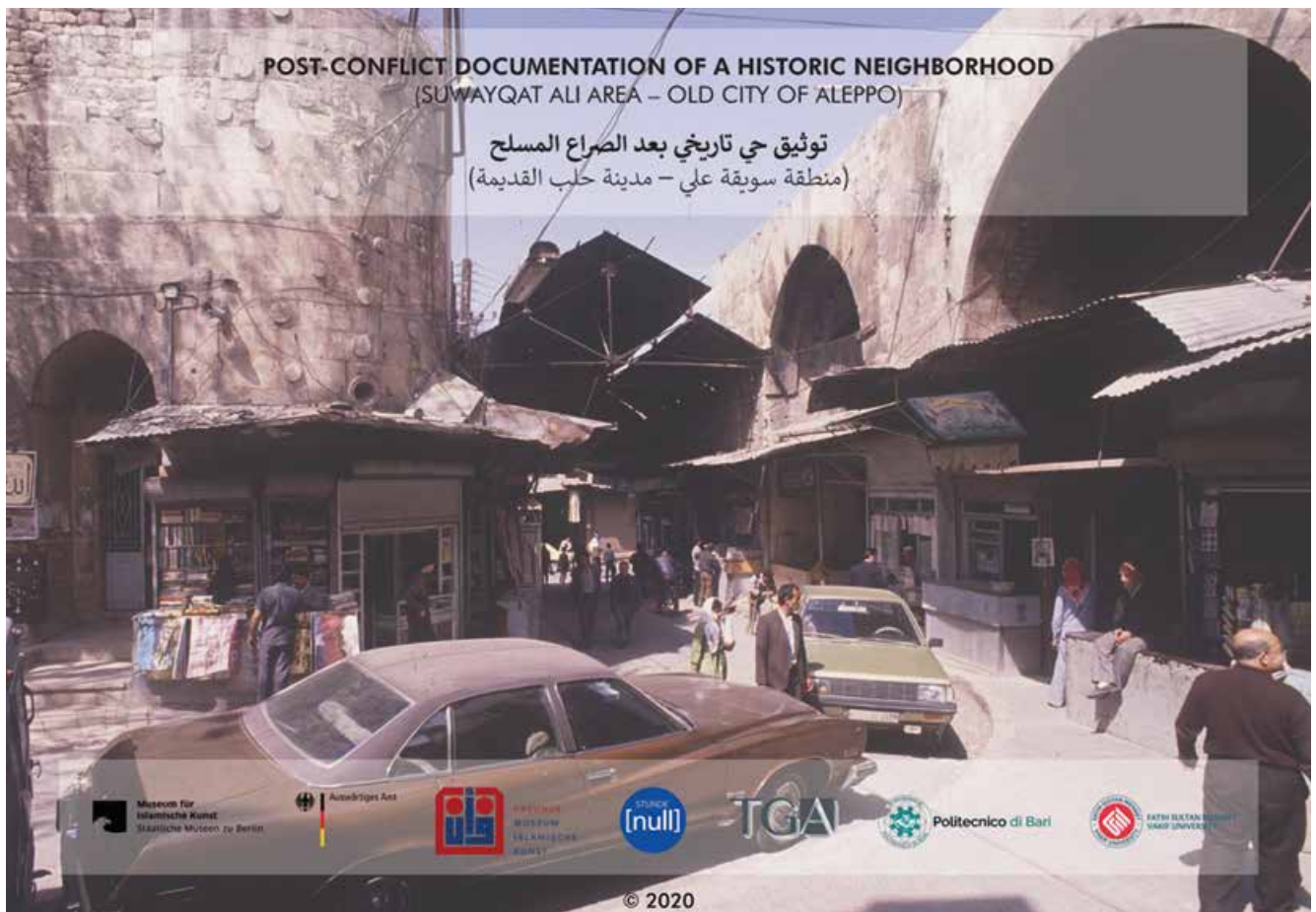
Fig. 6: Memories from Aleppo (<https://syrian-heritage.org/memories-from-aleppo/>)

e-publication on EDIT (Gerda Henkel digital publication platform, which also funds the project), written by international authors and researchers to describe the architecture, history, and importance of those places. We have been working on 32 monuments, written by the following twelve authors: Anette Gangler, Klaus Kreiser, Lorenz Korn, Michael Braune, Miriam Kühn, Stephan Westphal, Ruba

Kasmo, Ross Burns, Lamia al-Jasser, Stefan Knost, Rami al-Afandi, Eva al-Habib Nmeir.

The local voices and memories of some of the people who used to frequently visit those places are also included. Narrating their relationship and attachment to the place, as means of including the intangible aspect in the documentation (fig. 6).

Fig. 7: Cover page of the online publication of Stunde Null Project 2019







△ Fig. 8: Urban changes analysis in Suwayqat Ali area (1932 – 2011 – 2019) (Giulia Annalinda Neglia)



Figs. 9a, b: Historical and architectural assessment of historic buildings in Suwayqat Ali area (Ruba Kasmu)



**Stunde Null 2019**

The next step was to take more of a comprehensive approach, working on the urban scale and placing all those monuments within their context. With the generous support of the Foreign Office funding Stunde Null Program, which is one of the first large programs of the ArchHerNet (Archaeological Heritage Network) – “A Future for the Time After the Crisis”, that concentrates on preservation of cultural heritage and capacity building activities in the Middle east. The DAI (German Archaeological Institute) coordinates the pro-

gram and the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin has joined Stunde Null with the project: Post-Conflict Recovery of Urban Cultural Heritage – Case Study: Old City of Aleppo.

Deploying the museum’s broad scientific network and expertise over the years on Aleppo, the pilot project “Post-Conflict Documentation of a Historical Neighbourhood in Aleppo” has started in 2019 (fig. 7). Working on the severely destroyed historical area of Suwayqat Ali in the old city as our study area based on the high extent of damage, the outstanding value of the traditional urban fabric of different historic periods and architectural styles, and the availability of resources and former studies on the

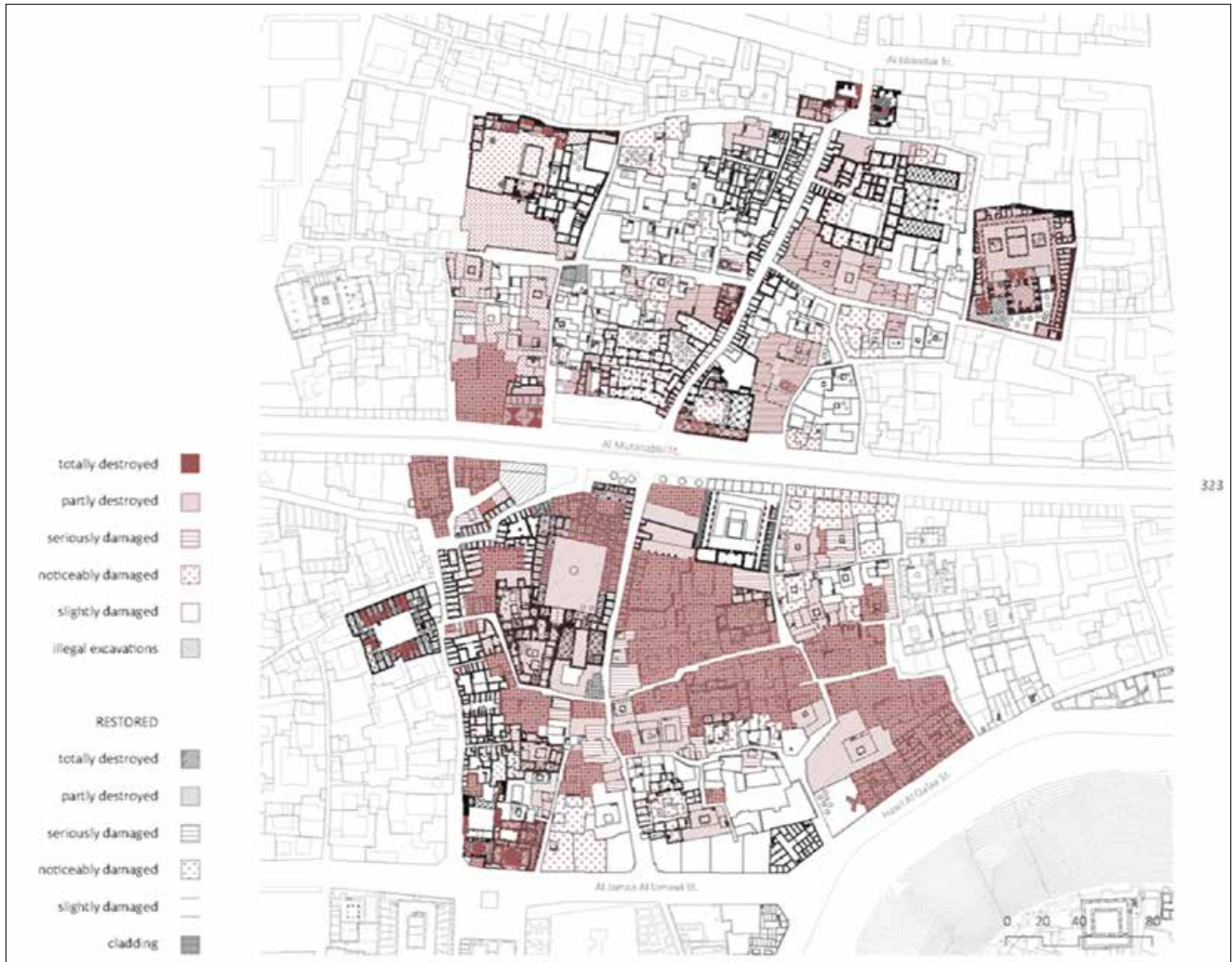


Fig. 10: Damage assessment map of Suwayqat Ali area 2019 (Thierry Grandin)

area: Analysing the urban morphology for 3 periods of time (1932, 2011 and 2019), describing the history and architecture of 38 monuments, and assessing the overall damage in the area. The extensive 350 pages publication is currently in its final editing process and to be released by the end of 2020 (figs. 8–10).

### Stunde Null 2020

From monuments to houses: in the same methodology, shifting to document the rest of the urban fabric, the under represented heritage of the residential fabric.

2020 stunde null project works on the archival material of Jean-Claude David to study the typological structure of traditional houses in al-Judayda quarter, defining the urban elements of a residential cluster, the typology of different sizes of traditional houses in the study area, the elements of a single house from special rooms, and the courtyard elevations and decorations (figs. 11a–c). The study also collects the know-how on building materials, construction techniques

and tools, categorising damage patterns, and suggesting levels of intervention and the steps of a conservation plan (fig. 12).

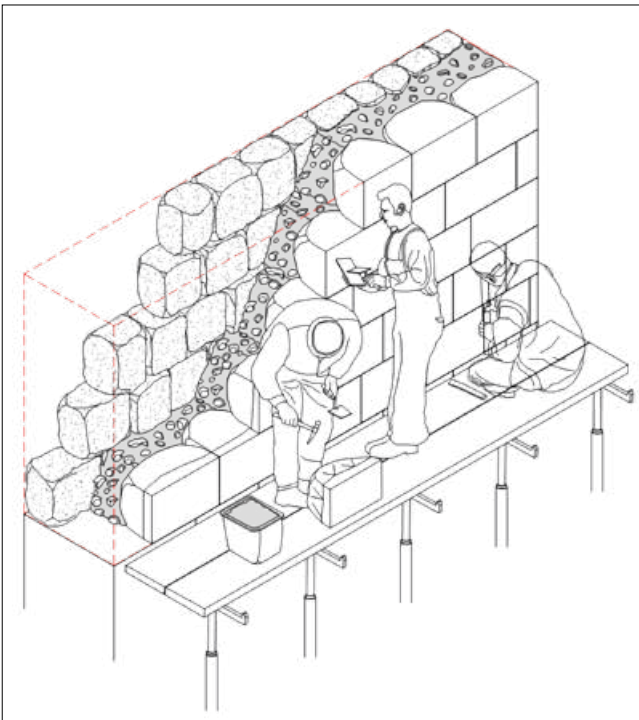
### Conclusion

With all the weight of the on-going war, the sanctions imposed on Syria, the political and economical climate in the country, people are left on their own to survive and rebuild their businesses and houses and safeguard their own heritage. The museum’s tries to take on an alternative strategy to help people in Aleppo, through empowering the local expertise and building bridges between Aleppo and the world.

By documenting and disseminating the knowledge available here, whether through personal channels directly or public (online) platforms, such as the archive’s Facebook page and front-end, with campaigns and regular shares, we try to include the people of Aleppo in the discussion and communicate directly with them on their needs and how to help.



*Figs. 11a–c: Selection of photos of traditional courtyard houses in Aleppo (Syrian Heritage Archive, Photos: Jean-Claude David)*



*Fig. 12: A sketch of a typical masonry wall work (Thierry Grandin)*

All materials are available for everyone online on the following Syrian projects' platforms:  
<https://syrian-heritage.org>  
<https://syrianheritage.gbv.de/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/heritagemap>  
<https://edit.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/aleppo-heritage-catalogue>