

Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage in Aleppo, Syria Reviewed:

a critical exploration of current endeavors and practices

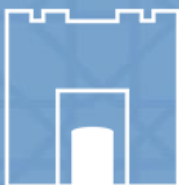
Diana Miznazi

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Beit Ajiqbash in Old Aleppo before its destruction. Photo by Diana Miznazi, 2011.

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب



Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage in Aleppo, Syria Reviewed: a critical exploration of current endeavors and practices

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Executive Summary

Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria, is known to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited urban spaces in the world. Aleppo has suffered great damage during the conflict exceeding individual landmarks to include complete neighborhoods. The city also witnessed critical outflows of population until the complete deportation of the eastern areas' population in late 2016.

Cultural heritage has the potential for supporting either the recovery process or further divisions in the war-torn society. This paper explores the role of cultural heritage in the current post-conflict reconstruction planning and implementation in Aleppo.

This paper emphasizes that reconstruction should be established on the basis of a shared vision, involving the different stakeholders – including but not limited to the evicted population – in its planning and application for such a process to be sustainable. The paper proposes that this is not the case in today's Aleppo and concludes that since reconstruction is a complex, multifaceted, long-term process, there could be room for a more multidisciplinary inclusive plan based on social justice in the future.

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Introduction

Syria is a country with one of the most unique histories in the Middle East region. Syria has six UNESCO World-Heritage Sites (WHS), all of which are currently included on the red list of World Heritage in Danger. Aleppo was the economic and industrial capital of the country prior to the current conflict. This has had great implications for the social fabric and the population's distribution in the city's neighborhoods, which later played an essential role in the destruction pattern of the city. The Ancient City of Aleppo,² at the heart of the city, is one of the UNESCO WHSs in Syria that has been subject to severe damage in the past few years, as the Syrian uprising turned into a tearing armed conflict due to the escalation of violence.

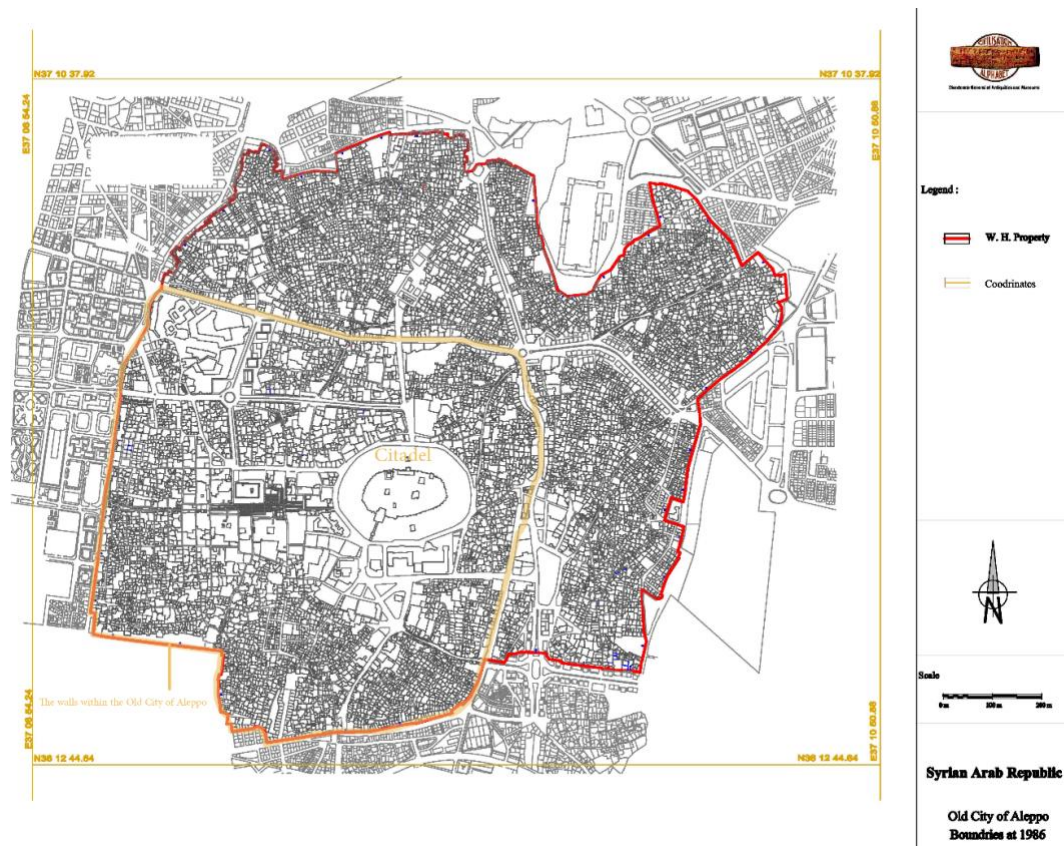


Figure 1. The Ancient City of Aleppo, map of the inscribed property, 2011. Available at https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/21/multiple=1&unique_number=24

Conflicts have been associated with cultural heritage destruction since the earliest recorded wars. Cultural heritage destruction is often viewed as 'collateral damage' affiliated with the conflict, as none of the belligerents considers it a priority.³ Other opinions have perceived cultural heritage

² The Ancient City of Aleppo is the name used by UNESCO for the World Heritage Site <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/21/>. It is, however, referred to as the Old City by the Aleppines. Therefore, it will be referred to as the Old City from now on in this paper.

³ Stone, Peter. "Protecting cultural heritage in times of conflict: lessons from Iraq." *Archaeologies* 5, no. 1 (2009), 32-38.

destruction as a symbolic gesture of power,⁴ which aims to erase the achievements of past cultures of ‘the others’.⁵ In Aleppo, both the carpet bombardment by the regime and the shelling and tunnel digging by different opposition troops were not done specifically for the sake of destroying cultural heritage. Heritage got in their way, as large parts of the Old City were a battlefield.⁶ None of the conflicting parties respected or implemented the 1954 Hague Convention for the protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflicts. Nonetheless, later when certain fundamentalist groups joined the fight, there was a number of reported cases of deliberately targeting heritage (mainly religious heritage) for ideological reason.⁷ That said, several measures were taken during the conflict by groups belonging to both camps to protect the surviving heritage at risk (see figures 2, 3).



Figure 2. The Syrian Association for Preservation of Archaeology and Heritage trying to salvage the Minbar in the Great Umayyad Mosque. Image after: [الجمعية السورية لحفظ الآثار والتراث], The Syrian Association for Preservation of Archaeology and Heritage

⁴ Stanley-Price, Nicholas. "The thread of continuity: cultural heritage in post-war recovery." In *Cultural Heritage in Post-war Recovery: Papers from the ICCOM Forum* (2007) 1-16.

⁵ Hadimuhamedovi, Amra. "The Built Heritage in the Post-War Reconstruction of Stolac." *Bosnia and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage*, edited by Helen Walasek (Ashgate, London, 2013), 289-314.

⁶ This assumption is an educated guess by the author, which can be criticized and contradicted by other researchers

⁷ Lostal, Marina. "Syria's world cultural heritage and individual criminal responsibility." *International Review of Law*, no: 1 (2015).



Figure 3. DGAM attempt to protect the statues of the National Museum in Aleppo. Image after: Dagher 2014.

The reconstruction of cultural heritage has lately been a much-discussed topic, with many studies, international conferences and workshops discussing its feasibility and significance from different perspectives for post-war societies. One of the emerging approaches in cultural heritage management has been the one utilizing conflict as a window of opportunity to correct vulnerabilities existing prior to it.⁸ This paper discusses whether this is applicable in the case of Aleppo under the current circumstances.

Damage in Aleppo

Several reports and publications addressed the severity of damage in the Old City of Aleppo. One of the comprehensive reports published by UNESCO-UNOSAT in 2018 indicates that approximately 10 percent of the cadastral-plotted buildings are totally destroyed, while almost 70 percent show signs of damage ranging from moderate to severe. This has been the result of five years of hostilities between July 2012 and December 2016, which wiped out complete urban areas within the city. The survey also indicates that the damage to the housing and infrastructure in the Old City is of a high level.⁹ During the conflict, the city of Aleppo was divided into the opposition-held eastern part and the regime-held western part. The Old City is situated in the Eastern side of the city and a large percentage of it was the spot for land battles, with constantly shifting frontlines. The damage doubled between March 2016 and December 2016, due to the heavy bombardment campaign by the regime to recapture the area in 2016.

According to the World Bank estimates right after the ‘cease of fighting’, the sector with the highest estimated damage is by far housing followed by energy (See figure 3).¹⁰ The water pipe

⁸ Amaratunga, Dilanthi, and Richard Haigh. *Post-disaster reconstruction of the built environment: Rebuilding for resilience*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 6.

⁹ UNESCO & UNITAR. *Five years of conflict: the state of cultural heritage in the Ancient City of Aleppo; A comprehensive multi-temporal satellite imagery-based damage analysis for the Ancient City of Aleppo*, (2018).

¹⁰ Arshad, Raja Rehan, and Joy-Fares Aoun. *Syria damage assessment of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib*. no: 121943. The World Bank, 2017.

network in the old quarters was extensively damaged and the residents of these areas relied mainly on wells and water tanks. More than half of the education facilities in the city of Aleppo were either damaged or fully destroyed. Nearly all health facilities in Eastern Aleppo were reported damaged or destroyed during the recent conflict.¹¹ Additionally, during the conflict, there were significant waves of displacement in and out of the city. This was followed by a complete evacuation of the residents of the eastern areas in December 2016, which changed the urban, demographic, and cultural landscape of the city. The Old City was considered the most abandoned area in the city during the earlier mentioned period, as the population drastically dropped by two-thirds during the first year of the conflict. The displaced persons were either internally displaced in the Western side of the city¹² and the rebel-held areas, or externally in Turkey when it was possible. The continuous bombardment and targeting ended up that only 35,000 people (fighters and civilians) were left in Eastern Aleppo right before the eviction in December 2016.¹³

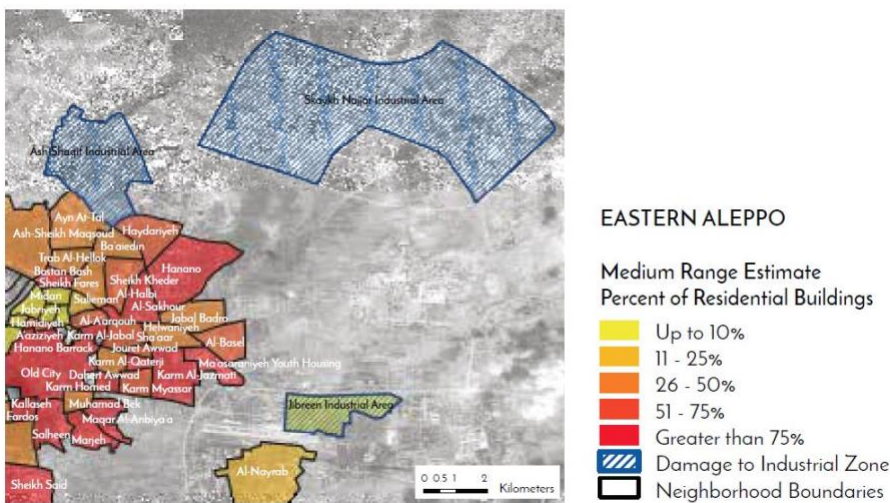


Figure 4. Residential housing Damage in Aleppo. Image after: World Bank 2017.

As the area was inaccessible, information on the destruction of cultural heritage first traveled through media and social media outlets by local initiatives of journalists and volunteers, such as Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (APSA).¹⁴ The alarming pace of destruction sparked international interest, and reports to map the damage have been constantly prepared and updated by several national and international entities, such as the American School of Oriental Research, Syrian Heritage Initiative (ASOR SHI) that produced weekly/monthly damage reports, and the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EMAENA) project, as well as UNITAR/UNOSAT. The Syrian regime's media has also reported the occurring damage at intervals. However, their narrative consistently maintained blaming the 'terrorists' of the

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Habitat, U.N. "City profile Aleppo: Multi sector assessment." *Swiss Agency for development and Cooperation SDC* (2014).

¹³ "SARC and ICRC finalise evacuation of some 35,000 people from devastated Aleppo neighbourhoods". December 22, 2016. *ICRC*. Accessed on February 16, 2019. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/sarc-and-icrc-finalise-evacuation-some-35000-people-devastated-aleppo-neighbourhoods>

¹⁴ Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology حماية الآثار السورية. Accessed on September 18, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/apsa2011/>

opposition for the destruction of Aleppo,¹⁵ even though most international reports clearly state the one main reason of destruction has been aerial bombing (a weapon the opposition never had access to).¹⁶

Cultural Heritage in Aleppo Prior to the Conflict

The perception of cultural heritage in Syria before the current conflict was affected by the state's cultural account. National identity was first crafted in Syria within the artificial borders drawn during the French Mandate based on pan-Arabism.¹⁷ These borders included multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-linguistic populations and architectural legacies that underwent pressure to unify under the newly created 'national identity'. Thus, the previously coexisting groups suffered from tensions due to forced ideologies.¹⁸ Later, and under Ba'ath party, Syria was emphasized as the cradle of civilizations and simultaneously the cradle of Arabism.¹⁹ This selective utilization of the ancient past was accomplished through employing the discoveries from archaeological sites and ancient figures as evidence of Syria's ancient superiority and a major constituent of the territorial identity of Syria.²⁰ Museums and cultural facilities served this cultural narrative, which mainly co-opted heritage to legitimise the 'imagined united community'.²¹ With little public outreach, and a disconnection from the standardized history curricula taught in the schools, it was difficult for the local population to relate to such a narrative.²² As a result, in 2010, for example, less than three per cent of Syrians visited local museums, archaeological sites and cultural events in Syria.²³ However, living heritage sites, especially religious ones, such as mosques, churches and caravanserais (*khans*) in Old Aleppo received a lot of attention and most of the inhabitants took pride in them. Another example is the old market (*Suq al-Madina*) in Aleppo, which was the core of economic and public life and used to have tens of thousands of visitors per day (locals and tourists).

Another important factor relating to the perception of heritage was the interventions in the Old City on the urban planning level. The Old City of Aleppo maintained its historic architectural and social fabric up to the mid-nineteenth century. Later and between the 1950s and 1970s the Old City witnessed major transformations. A series of foreign master plans suggested the destruction

¹⁵ Drake, Diana. "Is reconstruction of Aleppo's Grand Mosque whitewashing history?" May 12, 2018. *The National*. Accessed on February 16, 2019. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/is-reconstruction-of-aleppo-s-grand-mosque-whitewashing-history-1.728715>

¹⁶ UNESCO & UNITAR, Five years, 135.

¹⁷ Cobb, Elvan. "Cultural Heritage in Conflict: World Heritage Cities of the Middle East". (Thesis 2010), 138.

¹⁸ Zobler, Kari A. "Syrian national museums: regional politics and the imagined community." In *Contested Cultural Heritage* (Springer, New York, NY, 2011), 171-191.

¹⁹ Qassar, Hiba. "Politics, identity and the social role of museums in Syria." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 36, no. 1 (2021), 14-29.

²⁰ Munawar, Nour A. "Reconstructing narratives: The politics of heritage in contemporary Syria." *Journal of Social Archaeology* (2021).

²¹ Zobler, Syrian national museums.

²² Qassar, Hiba. "The educational role of museums in Syria Museum" *Atassi Foundation for arts and culture*. Accessed on October 28, 2022. <https://www.atassifoundation.com/features/the-educational-role-of-museums-in-syria>

²³ "More than 2 million visitors of archaeological sites in Syria last year". *DP News*. Accessed on April 3, 2018. <http://www.dp-news.com/pages/detail.aspx?articleid=31959>

of certain areas of the historic core. Fortunately, only a part of these plans was achieved but they prompted a campaign of both local and international efforts to safeguard the cultural heritage of Old Aleppo.²⁴ The campaign concluded with the inscription of Old Aleppo as a World Heritage Site in 1986. In 1992, Old Aleppo became the subject of a rehabilitation project with the joint effort of the Syrian government and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ, part of GIZ since 2011).²⁵ The project focused on upgrading the public infrastructure and the urban spaces, with little progress made in rehabilitating the private residential fabric. The funding program designed to help rehabilitate private housing had minimum impact on upgrading the historic fabric (impacted less than 1% of the property in the Old City).²⁶ In 1999, the Directorate of the Old City (DOC) was established, which was the local body responsible for developing strategies inherent to the Old City preservation. In 2006, the DOC, GTZ, and The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) initiated a project to improve the perimeter of the Citadel and the adjacent neighborhoods –the touristic areas.

Most of the previous works carried out in Aleppo, regardless of their fluctuating implications and aspirations, were not entirely successful in applying social inclusionary principles, nor did they fully integrate the needs of the local residents in their implementation.²⁷ In fact what was conceived to protect residential function gradually triggered tourism gentrification instead. These projects did not offer the locals services and solutions to their everyday problems, such as transportation and accessibility to a public park. In addition, the income generated from touristic ‘development projects’ was not reflected on the quality of life of the residents.

Regarding social distribution, Aleppo has had some obvious and some under-the-surface fault lines even before the conflict. Almost half of the city’s population lived in informal settlements, which were concentrated on the eastern side of the city. A few of these settlements were located within the Old City. Aleppo was also home to a large population of rural migrants of lower income groups settling in the eastern side, whereas the western side of the city comprised the wealthier neighborhoods. The different ethnic and religious minorities in the city were also clustering in certain neighborhoods.

Numerous attempts were made to give the Syrian conflict a religious-sectarian nature, mainly between the Sunni majority of the population and the Alawite minority in Syria, the latter being the main component of the governing regime.²⁸ This is not to be underestimated in the context of Aleppo, especially when considering foreign influences. However, the urban-rural dichotomy, tribal loyalties, and socio-economic cleavages all played a more significant role in the city’s strife and the destruction pattern, which was concentrated in the poorer and densely inhabited eastern

²⁴ Bianca, Stefano, Jean-Claude David, Giovanni Rizzardi, Yves Beton, and Bruno Chauffert-Yvart. "The Conservation of the Old City of Aleppo." *Report prepared for the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)*, 1980.

²⁵ GTZ. "Development Plan for the Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo". Aleppo: GTZ, 1998.

²⁶ Vincent, Lieza Helen. "When home becomes world heritage: the case of Aleppo, Syria." (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004).

²⁷ Khirfan, Luna. "From documentation to policy-making: Management of built heritage in Old Aleppo and Old Acre." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* (2010): 35-54.

²⁸ Jasser, M. Zuhdi. "Sectarian Conflict in Syria." *Prism* 4 (2014): 58-67.

areas.^{29,30} Thus, five years of armed assaults, which included a clear separation of the city's eastern and western areas have deepened these fault lines. They have even created further divisions that continue to exist – if not expand – under the current circumstances, as of 2023.

The Post Conflict Situation

In December 2016 the Syrian regime announced they had completely seized the city of Aleppo. Before developing a comprehensive strategy to clear the debris resulting from the conflict, a couple of main streets leading to the citadel at the center of the old city were cleared from the rubble based on the Emergency Recovery Plan for the entire city from January 2017 (see Figure 5),^{31,32} and the photo of the head of the regime was hung on the inner gate of the Citadel at the heart of the Old City to declare 'triumph'. In March 2017, UNESCO-Beirut office held a Technical Coordination Meeting on the Ancient City of Aleppo including the different local stakeholders and international initiatives and experts. The meeting aimed at 'strategiz[ing] Aleppo's recovery' and coordinating the efforts of the different entities.³³

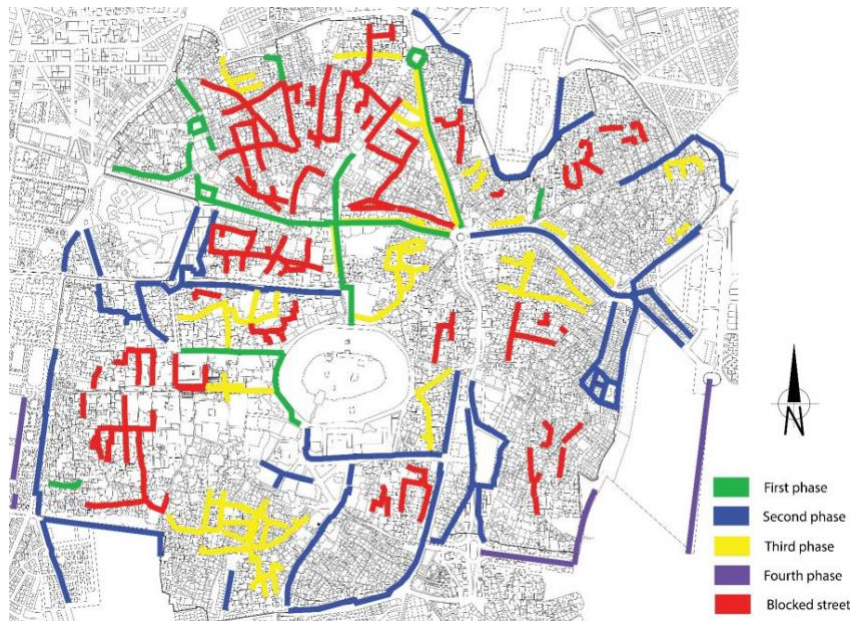


Figure 5. Project for the removal of rubble in the Old City. After Kousa, C., & Pottgiesser, U. (2020).

²⁹ Pagani, G. "Urban Conflicts and Multiple War Narratives: The Case of Aleppo". *Jadaliyya*. Accessed on April 16, 2018. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33546/Urban-Conflicts-and-Multip>

³⁰ Bandarin, Francesco. "The Destruction of Aleppo: The Impact of the Syrian War on a World Heritage City" in Cuno, James, and Thomas G. Weiss, eds. *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022.)

³¹ Kousa, Christine, and Uta Pottgiesser. "Post Syrian-war material recovery, reuse and transformation in the Old City of Aleppo." *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* (2019).

³² Ferrier, M. "Rebuilding the city of Aleppo: do the Syrian authorities have a plan?". *European University Institute* (2020).

³³ UNESCO. UNESCO hosts First International Coordination Meeting for the recovery of Aleppo's heritage (2017). <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1639>. The author participated in this meeting as an individual heritage expert.

A strategy for the recovery process was developed afterwards in 2018 by a steering committee including the Directorate-General of Antiquities & Museums (DGAM), AKTC,³⁴ and Syrian Trust for Development (STD)³⁵ among other governmental and scientific entities.³⁶ The "cultural heritage first-aid projects" started shortly afterwards in the newly seized Old City quarters. Such projects focused on important landmarks. For example, one of the first projects initiated was the restoration of the Great Umayyad Mosque in the Old City funded by the Chechen Republic in a cooperation with the Military Construction and Implementation Cooperation.^{37, 38} Other projects that followed were dedicated to religious buildings with small grants given by particular individuals to "have a place in paradise" or through fundraising by the Church.³⁹ Some local initiatives, such as the one of *Khan al-Gumruk* merchants made it possible to restore the public spaces in the Khan and the one for the restoration of Bab al-Faraj Clock Tower.⁴⁰ The media coverage of these projects by pro-regime media outlets has been supporting the account of "victory over terrorism".⁴¹ The AKTC identified three areas of interest in the Old City, namely the ancient markets, the Citadel and two residential areas (*al-Bayyada* and *Bab al-Ahmar*).⁴² Some sections of the ancient markets (*suqs*) were included in the first phase of the recovery strategy. The *suqs* were selected with the hope of reviving commerce and reactivating the wheel of economy. The pilot project, namely the restoration of *Suq al-Saqatiyya* started at the end of 2018 and the first phase was completed in 2019. The points attest to the success of this pilot project: The restoration was preceded by a workshop organised in cooperation with DGAM, UNESCO and STD on stone masonry techniques;⁴³ meetings were organised with the shop owners to discuss their hopes and concerns of the reconstruction process; the common spaces and the infrastructure were restored and upgraded by AKTC in cooperation with a local contractor. However, the shops' interior was left to the owners to restore with support from STD to obtain the required permits.⁴⁴ The project was granted the Grand Award for Heritage Sites and Building Category for Good Practices in

³⁴ AKTC is one of the few international organizations currently investing efforts in the Old City

³⁵ STD is a non-profit NGO directly linked to the wife of the head of the Syrian Regime, Asma al-Assad, as she is the chairperson of the board of the directors of the NGO.

³⁶ Kasmó, Ruba, and Lina Kutiefan. "Post-War Recovery of the Old City of Aleppo: The Rehabilitation of Suq al-Saqatiyya as a Pilot Project." *Analysis of case studies in recovery and reconstruction* (2020), 90-115.

³⁷ "Architectural teams continue restoration of the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo". *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*. Video interview. Accessed on September 28, 2018. <https://sana.sy/en/?p=147576>

³⁸ Affaki, Mounir Sabeh. "Reconstruction of Heritage and Spirit: Mending the Scars of Aleppo." In *Historic Cities in the Face of Disasters* (Springer, Cham, 2021), 263-279.

³⁹ Halawi, Lama. "The restoration of the presbyterian church in Aleppo bears sweet fruit nourishing everybody". Accessed on September 18, 2022 <https://www.mecc.org/mecc/2021/5/27/the-restoration-of-the-presbyterian-church-in-aleppo-bears-sweet-fruit-nourishing-everybody>

⁴⁰ Grandin, Thierry. "Post-war reconstruction projects and programs in the Old City of Aleppo." In *Die Altstadt von Aleppo-Gestern und Heute, Aleppo Journal 2021*, vol. 1, (EB-Verlag Dr. Brandt, Druck und Bindung: Hubert & Co, Göttingen, 2022), 45-53.

⁴¹ "TASS news agency highlights return of life to normal in Aleppo and its citadel." *SANA*. Accessed on September 18, 2022. <http://www.sana.sy/?p=1173608>

⁴² Grandin, post-war reconstruction projects.

⁴³ DGAM "State Party Report: On the State of Conservation of the Syrian Cultural Heritage Sites". (2018) <https://whc.unesco.org/document/165430>

⁴⁴ Kasmó and Kutiefan, post-war recovery of the old city of Aleppo

Cultural Heritage Conservation and Management in the Arab Region.⁴⁵ The rehabilitation/reconstruction project has been positively evaluated by the remaining residents and shop owners and has been ‘physically restored in a way that respected its historical and architectural values within the planned time frame and the allocated budget’. However, the negative aspects pointed out by these remaining residents was that the project was not discussed or properly explained to the public (although certain stakeholders and experts were consulted, as mentioned earlier).⁴⁶

The head of the regime together with his family visited Aleppo on July 8, 2022, including the *sua* and the Umayyad Mosque for the first time since the start of the revolution in 2011. His wife attended a workshop organised by STD on the rehabilitation of the *sua*s. Both Bashar and Asmaa al-Assad made sure to blame the opposition and the foreign forces for the destruction and to take credit for the reconstruction.⁴⁷ Additionally, the Old City of Aleppo and the ancient *sua*s have been some of the main stops for foreign influencers and travel youtubers that have been visiting Syria in the past two years, as of 2023. The footage from these war-tourism videos with nostalgic ruins in the background are made with the hope of showing the “Syria that the media won’t show”, as the video from the youtuber Benjamin Rich is named.⁴⁸ However, these influencers are presenting a ‘sanitized version of reality’ of the still worn-torn country and are ‘normalizing the Assad regime and parroting its narrative of the war’, according to human rights monitors.^{49, 50}

That said, the housing sector together with other service sectors related to it in the Old City, which are the main concern of the locals, received next to no support. In fact, people have to rely on their own assets to move the debris to the street (to be collected by the authorities) and to restore their houses and come back to them.⁵¹ These assets have been drastically affected by eight years of conflict. Moreover, any reconstruction or alteration is prohibited or subject to a permit obtained through a complicated procedure for the residents, as the area is a UNESCO WHS and no concept on how to deal with housing exists, as the current policies are focused on monuments.⁵²

⁴⁵ " 2021-2022 ICCROM-Sharjah Award winners". *ICCROM* Accessed on September 18, 2022. <https://www.iccrom.org/news/2021-2022-iccrom-sharjah-award-winners>

⁴⁶ Kasmoo and Kutiefan, post-war recovery of the old city of Aleppo

⁴⁷ “For the first time since the outbreak of the revolution, Bashar al-Assad lands in the city of Aleppo with his wife and children”. Video *Syria Stream*. Accessed on September 16, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OyAINWLF_o

⁴⁸ Benjamin Rich. “The Syria The Media Won't Show You”. Accessed on September 20, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6d0zw-DxpU>

⁴⁹ “How Western travel bloggers project a sanitized reality of Syria’s war”. *Arab News*. Accessed on October, 12, 2022. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2151541/media>

⁵⁰ “Travel influencers are flocking to Syria and hyping the war-torn country for tourists. Critics say they're normalizing the Assad regime and parroting its narrative of the war.” *Insider*. Accessed on September 16, 2022. <https://www.insider.com/travel-syria-youtubers-critics-say-whitewashing-assad-regime-2022-7>

⁵¹ Kousa and Pottgiesser. Post Syrian-war material recovery.

⁵² Kousa, Christine, Uta Pottgiesser, and Barbara Lubelli. "Post-Syrian War Residential Heritage Transformations in the Old City of Aleppo: Socio-Cultural Sustainability Aspects." *Sustainability* 13, no. 21 (2021).

I interviewed a number of former residents of the Old City,⁵³ and the majority stated that the area has not yet returned to ‘normal’ including that of the restored *sugs*. This is mainly because a large percentage of the former residents (who make up a significant part of the customers and the shop owners) have not returned to the city due to many reasons; the main of which is security. Several of the previous residents interviewed stated that they fear for their security and therefore will not return in the presence of the current regime. Several studies have stressed that the fear of persecution as well as the discriminatory legislation and urban laws, put in place by the regime since 2012, have hampered the return of the refugees and simultaneously the success of the reconstruction and the recovery.⁵⁴

Another significant factor highlighted in the interviews was that some of the residents who fled to the western side of the city or neighboring countries find it difficult now to cope with the way of living and the services available in the Old City. According to the interviewees, the infrastructure of the Old City such as water and electricity networks as well as the basic services (transportation, schools, hospitals) received scant attention by the government. The inadequate quality of infrastructure is not specific to the case of conflict, as the city experienced a drastic population reduction in the 1970s. At that time, a large percentage of the original owners left for new residential areas, which marked the creation of certain unplanned settlements within the Old City. However, such mass immigration as the one witnessed today has definitely magnified the results. These findings are corroborated by a 2021 field study by Kousa et al. on residential heritage in three neighborhoods in Old Aleppo, namely *al-Farafra*, *al-Aqaba*, *al-Jalloum*.⁵⁵ The study highlighted that the lack of strategic planning – where the housing sector, the public services and the infrastructure related to them are properly considered – poses a great threat to the sustainability of post-conflict reconstruction.

The Role of Cultural Heritage in the Reconstruction Process

Previous conflicts have proven that cultural heritage is an instrumental tool for recovery.⁵⁶ Post-conflict reconstruction of cultural heritage can be implemented to overcome the rhetoric of identity clashes and promote heritage to establish national identity.⁵⁷ The reconstruction of the Old City of Aleppo is the right of the locals. It would help in fulfilling the psychological need of regaining the familiar as an act of survival.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, reconstruction should be inclusive and based on social

⁵³ Seven interviews in February 2019 and four interviews in September 2022, with former residents of the Ancient City all currently residing elsewhere including the western parts of the city, Turkey, and Europe, as well as architects working on the restoration projects in the Old City, interviewed by the Author on the phone.

⁵⁴ Abou Zainedin. & Fakhani 2018. Abou Zainedin. & Fakhani 2020. Anna Costa and Michele MacMillan, “From Rebel to Regime: Barriers of Return to Aleppo for Internally Displaced People,” The Aleppo Project, CEU Shattuck Center, School for Public Policy, July 2018, <http://bit.ly/2SN4gEG>.

⁵⁵ Kousa et al., Post-Syrian war residential heritage.

⁵⁶ Viejo-Rose, Dacia, and Marie Louise Stig Sørensen. "Cultural heritage and armed conflict: new questions for an old relationship." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015), 292.

⁵⁷ Leturcq, Jean-Gabriel. "Heritage-making and Policies of Identity in the “Post-conflict Reconstruction” of Sudan." *Égypte/Monde arabe* 5-6 (2009), 295-328.

⁵⁸ Stanely-Price, The thread of continuity.

justice without discriminating against one party of the population or another.⁵⁹ It should be a democratic process, prioritizing the needs of the public. The current reconstruction of the Old City of Aleppo is a unique case since the Syria Regime, which largely contributed to the destruction, is actively involved in the reconstruction.⁶⁰ It is also completely ignoring that the capture of the city included mass killing and eviction of innocent civilians and thus cannot be addressed in isolation of the political situation.⁶¹ Although the reconstruction has been slow and hindered by restricted funds due to the international sanctions on the regime, the regime has utilized urban policies to hinder the return of opposition figures. One of laws enabling such policies is Decree 66, which provides a legal basis for the reconstruction of informal settlements (a couple of which are within the Old City).⁶² Such reconstruction is serving a one-sided narrative. This narrative claims that those who stayed will be rewarded. However, the current situation suggests otherwise. The locals are not being included in the decision-making process and their needs are not regarded as a priority. The current projects are focused on what can be displayed, showcased, and presented to the international community as cultural heritage reconstruction. According to al-Daher – one of the leading architects in the *suq al-Saqatiyya* project, the project aims at ‘erasing the signs of war’ and correcting the previous violations.⁶³

Politicizing heritage is quite common after civil wars, as heritage can be used as a political resource to establish a form of ‘national unity’. Yet, peace cannot be accomplished without reformulating the cultural identity including the negative sides of it instead of imposing a compulsory positive image for post-conflict heritage-making policies (cultural alterity instead of cultural diversity).⁶⁴ In other words, the Syrian regime’s discourse on the beautiful multi-ethnic, multi-religious mosaic of the Syrian population overlooking the tensions and underlying stresses between different groups is not the answer. In fact, the Syrian regime is discarding any attempt for such unity by enforcing this ‘homogeneous Syria’ mosaic notion. It is insisting that everyone opposing the government is a terrorist and a traitor. It has even disregarded any protection work done by the opposition, for example, by claiming they were only destroying cultural heritage and not protecting it.⁶⁵

Cultural heritage is an ideologically charged tool in the reconstruction phase, which can have different impacts depending on the way it is used. The reconstruction can facilitate further

⁵⁹ Abou Zainedin. Sawsan & Fakhani, Hani. “Syria Needs a Plan for Just and Inclusive Reconstruction”. *Chatham House*. Accessed on August 1, 2018. <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/syria-needs-a-plan-for-just-and-inclusive-reconstruction>

⁶⁰ Mahfouz, Judy. "Old Souks of Aleppo: A Narrative Approach to Post-conflict Heritage Reconstruction." In *Historic Cities in the Face of Disasters* (Springer, Cham, 2021), 47-64.

⁶¹ Sawsan Abou Zainedin and Hani Fakhani. “Syria’s Reconstruction Between Discriminatory Implementation And Circumscribed Resistance” in Maha Yahya *Contentious Politics in the Syrian Conflict: Opposition, Representation, and Resistance* (2020).

⁶² Costa and MacMillan, From Rebel to Regime.

⁶³ “Aleppo's old suqs rise from the ruins”. *Alaraba*. Accessed on September 16, 2022. [أسواق حلب-القديمة-تنهض-من-الأنقاض](https://alarab.co.uk/أسواق-حلب-القديمة-تنهض-من-الأنقاض)

⁶⁴ Leturcq, Heritage-making and Policies of Identity.

⁶⁵ This was claimed by several Syrian official entities during the First International Coordination Meeting for the recovery of Aleppo’s heritage in 2017, where the author was present, and was contested by the UNESCO-Beirut staff who reported seeing the protection efforts by the opposition during their visit to Aleppo preceding the meeting.

divisions if based on the fault lines created by the conflict.⁶⁶ Post-conflict reconstruction is an extended process that cannot be rushed or imposed. A grassroots approach towards the reconstruction is fundamental for a sustainable and effective recovery. However, the current reconstruction of the Old City of Aleppo has not been sensitive to the main stakeholders, neither the evicted nor those who continue to live there. The reconstruction cannot be undertaken as a solo activity without a holistic political solution which guarantees accountability, justice, and inclusion.

Post-conflict reconstruction of the Old City of Aleppo should consider the nature and complexity of the Old City and should be considered in relation to the urban fabric of the entire city. It should prioritize interventions based on the magnitude of destruction and the urgency for the revival of the areas/structures. Residential areas, for example, and not only those of high cultural significance, need to be prioritized as they would play an essential role in the recovery of the city. The reconstruction should not be only focusing on monuments, as the current case is. Previous rehabilitation/restoration efforts in Old Aleppo have not been focused on answering the locals' needs. Post-conflict reconstruction can only be successful if it adopted a bottom-up approach, which grants the full participation of the local community.

The reconstruction of Aleppo is going to be a long-term commitment that will need many years. It has started at a slow pace due to the international community refraining from contributing to it and the international sanctions, which have unfairly affected average Syrians. As Abu Zainedin and Fakhani pointed out, the solution is not by abstaining from reconstructing, but by creating the proper tools for international involvement in rebuilding Syria through accounting for the rights of the Syrians without empowering the Syrian regime to commit more human rights violation throughout the reconstruction process.⁶⁷ This leaves a margin of hope that the current approach might change in the future to be less exclusive and more considerate of the residents of Aleppo.

⁶⁶ Viejo-Rose, Dacia. "Destruction and reconstruction of heritage: impacts on memory and identity." *Heritage, memory and identity* 4 (2011), 53-69.

⁶⁷ Abou Zainedin and Fakhani. Syria's Reconstruction between Discriminatory Implementation and Circumscribed Resistance.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Aleppo Project, Shattuck Centre, the School of Public Policy or Central European University.



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The 5th Lemkin Reunion

March 2019 marked eight years since people in a wide web of villages and cities across the Syrian landscape took to the streets in defiance of the Assad family's rule. Initially responding with gunfire, imprisonment and torture, the regime's strategy evolved into the carpet bombing and mass destruction of whole rural and urban communities, culminating in the forced transfer of all remaining residents from areas such as Ghouta and eastern Aleppo, which remain largely uninhabited. Although the fighting has ebbed, the war in Syria has not ended and a political settlement has not been reached. The near ten million displaced, mainly in harsh conditions in and around Syria, do not feel safe to return to their neighbourhoods and villages. However, the Syrian government has promulgated laws enabling the construction of development projects where displaced communities once resided with no or few guarantees of compensation for displaced property owners. One such project, Marota City, plotted over the demolished informal district of Basateen al-Razi, is already under construction. What will reconstruction under the current conditions serve? Under what conditions can reconstruction in Syria be equitable?

[Other publications from the 5th Lemkin Reunion](#) can be found in the papers section of the Aleppo Project website.