

The Making of a New Historic City Center in Damascus

Faedah M. Totah

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
ftotah@vcu.edu

Keywords: Old City; Damascus; Preservation Regulations; Politics of Heritage

Since the Old City of Damascus has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site different policies and regulations have been put in place to protect the historic site from the onslaught of modernization. Although the main purpose of these policies was to protect the local traditional architecture and urban fabric they inadvertently contributed to the deterioration of many buildings thereby highlighting the gap between government conservation policies and actual implementation. The main shortcoming of these policies was to dismiss the people who actually lived in the Old City and who were considered to be poor rural migrants with no vested interest in the local history or heritage. In this paper I show how social aspects remain missing in the current revitalization of the Old City. I will begin with a brief overview of the policies to protect the Old City where I argue that the focus on architecture is politically motivated. The lack of social dimension to many of these policies and regulations not only make them unpopular but also impractical thereby raising major concern about the true owners and stewards of the urban heritage. I will then describe the socio-economic changes during the past decade that led to the revitalization of the Old City of Damascus as an important tourist site. This interest has in turn encouraged the preservation of the vernacular architecture which is now considered heritage. Yet this preservation is taking the form of non-residential use such as restaurants and boutique hotels which in turn undermines the preservation policies of the government and further marginalizes the local inhabitants from these new investment opportunities. I will conclude with how the current revitalization of the Old City could easily lead to a depopulated open museum and therefore a dead but well-preserved city.

Introduction:

In 2004, I was walking to my room in the Old City of Damascus one night when I heard the sound of hammering and chiseling coming from a courtyard house near where I was staying. I could also hear the sound of scrapping and dumping of dirt. A group of women walking behind were also intrigued by the noise and one of them asked her companions: “What is happening here?” The question turned out to be rhetorical. When one of the companions replied that the owners were renovating their house illegally, the woman snorted as she said: “I fixed my house in broad daylight and no one said a word.”

This incident illustrates a common occurrence in the Old City where long-term residents seek ways to bypass the formal procedure to obtain permits to restore, renovate, or rebuild their houses in the UNESCO designated World Heritage site. Historic cities become possessed by the past when they are designated as heritage sites and the “underlying tensions between current and previous inhabitants; between local history and world history; between user and visitor; between internal and external space; between depth and superficiality” are negotiated in conservation projects to determine ownership and stewardship of the built environment.¹ Therefore, residents in heritage sites are often vying either with the past and history for recognition or with officials for control over their physical environment.

In this paper I will demonstrate the tension between heritage and the inhabitants of the historic center as manifested in the interpretation and implementation of the preservation decree for the intramural Old City. I argue that although the guidelines and procedures are geared to the preservation of buildings, they actually contribute to their

¹ Alyin Orbasli, *Tourists in Historic Towns: Urban Conservation and Heritage Management*, London and New York: E&FNSPON, (2000), 8, 15.

decay because they do not accommodate the daily needs of residents. As a matter of fact, the number of dilapidated buildings has increased in the Old City (a third of houses are in serious condition and the remaining two thirds ranges from medium to good) as a result of the restoration and rebuilding guidelines.² The number of derelict houses is linked to the lack of a social dimension in the preservation decree for the Old City. I attribute this to the widely held notion that the current inhabitants of the heritage site do not possess cultural affinity for the site since many are rural migrants and refugees; rather they are seen as the reason for the decay. As a matter of fact the designation of the Old City as heritage site in 1979 was an attempt to “save” the historic center from the onslaught of modernization which included the modifications many residents were making to their built environment. The current political and economic situation further challenges the notion of heritage and preservation as courtyard houses are purchased by invested and converted into hotels and restaurants. I conclude with the fact that continued lack of interest in the residents of the Old City could lead to a depopulated but “disneyfied” heritage site.

Official Policy and Social Reality

The tension between residents and officials in historic or heritage sites is centered on how best to preserve the city which in turn is determined by what is seen as threatening the built environment. In 1982 an architect working on the preservation of the Old City explained the deterioration of the Old City:

The general decay of the historic center can be attributed to demographics and social causes. The only built environment found until the 18th century was the area within the walls (the current historic center). In the outskirts

² UNESCO and ICOMOS, Mission Report, Ancient City of Damascus, 23-29 April 2008:14.

lived the rural migrant but in the intramural neighborhood lived a class that was well-off...The population increase and desertion of the center [by this well-off class] enabled rural migrants to flow inside the walls where they began to populate the old center with new social classes that did not possess the ability to maintain the historic center because they lacked a sense of belonging to the Old City.³

This remains a widely held view among those who work on and for the protection of the historic center in Damascus; the current residents are unable to appreciate the heritage of the Old City and demonstrate this when they seek ways around restrictions to modify their homes as they saw fit. This included the use of aluminum and cement in ways that are not only incompatible with the traditional material of mud, wood, and straw but lack any aesthetic value. Therefore, the new inhabitants in addition to not valuing the heritage, they lack taste. Of course the true culprits if one is to assign blame, is modernization which led many of the original inhabitants, who would have maintained and taken care of the Old City, to leave for modern apartment buildings in modern neighborhoods. Today almost 67% of the residents in the Old City are tenants. In addition rent control that was not repealed until 2004, as I will discuss below, meant that many families for generations lived in houses they did not own. Therefore, not many

³ Nazih Kawakibi, *Al-Tarikah Al-Amalyeh li trameem wa 'dat 'hya' al-markaz al-taeiki li madinat dimashq al-qademah* (The practical guide for the restoration and rehabilitation of the historic center of Old Damascus.) in *Nadwat Dimashq Al-Qadmeh*, ed. Niqabat Al-Muhandseen Al-Suryien (Damascus: n.p. 1982), 135-6.

owners were interested in investing money restoring houses they were not financially benefiting from and had tenants they could not evict.⁴

The Department of Antiquities under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture is responsible for the protection of the cultural heritage in the Old City which includes overseeing rules for construction but all building activities within in the Old City is actually regulated by the executive office of the Damascus Governorate Council.⁵ There are three types of building activities: restoration, rebuilding, or both in one building as long as the activity adheres to the original parameters of the building and maintains the internal open space, i.e. the courtyard, as well as the rest of the structure as it appears in the cadastral maps from 1926-1927 until 1948. Types of material to be used and steps to be taken to obtain permits are also outlined in Decision 826/1996, the most recent update of the decree for the renovation and rebuilding of the intramural Old City.

Since intervention is based on the physical state of the building rather than the need for preservation, owners have no incentive to restore their property until it becomes no longer habitable or salvageable and then they can apply for a rebuilding permit.⁶ According to the decree any restoration entails the removal of all illegal construction such as additional floors, buildings in the courtyard, closing of open space, and to rebuild missing fountains and rooms so that the structure closely resembles the cadastral maps of the 1920s. Since owners have houses or buildings that have undergone major modification over the decades, they are not interested in returning the structure to their form as in the cadastral plan when many of the buildings lacked modern amenities and conveniences. The decree also stipulates the type of material used in the restoration or

⁴ UNESCO, Mission Report, 14.

⁵ Ibid., 6

⁶ Ibid.

rebuilding-traditional material- though cement, bricks, and tiles can only used in certain areas and for specific purposes. Concrete is officially forbidden. This poses additional obstacles for owners, who want to restore or rebuilt their property, since the required material for construction is not readily available. In some cases it is difficult to find workmen who are skilled in working with traditional materials. Furthermore, buildings of traditional material require annual maintenance which increases the financial burden on many owners especially landlords who do not get compensation from their rentals to offset maintenance costs.

Therefore, many owners opt not to restore their houses but allow them to crumble which happens sooner rather than later due to the fragility of traditional building material. Other residents simply bypass the procedure to obtain permits and illegally fix their houses. They do this not only to avoid the convoluted bureaucratic procedure that is costly and time consuming but also to evade inspection visits by officials who are required to regularly supervise building activity and ensure it is being done according to the preservation specifications. These visits are not routine and may lead to complications in the rebuilding effort. Some of the complications include the issue of bribes which can be initiated by owners for inspectors to overlook certain violations. But they could also be instigated by the inspector so as not to obstruct building activity. Therefore, much of the rebuilding or restoration that takes place in the Old City circumvents the official procedure and owners either work on their house in broad daylight, if they have special relations with high ranking bureaucrats, or surreptitiously at night in order to escape detection. However, restoring one's house at night does not

escape the notice of the neighbors. Therefore, the neighbors' approval has to be obtained or they might inform the authorities.

Neoliberalism in the city

Since the early 1990s the Syrian regime began adopting economic neoliberal policies to encourage foreign investment in Syria. Among the many new policies was a new rent law that phased out long term tenancy. This directly influenced the Old City with its high percentage of renters. The law came into effect in 2004 and immediately had serious ramifications for tenants in the Old City especially those who have been living for decades in the same house.⁷ According to the law tenants can either pay a new rent that reflects current market value or if the landlord wants his property back, they must move but get a percentage of the real estate as estimated by a government assessor. Many property owners took this opportunity to evict tenants even when they were willing to pay the new rent. Owners were encouraged by the new investment opportunities available in the Old City where many courtyard homes are purchased by investors and converted into restaurants and hotels. Actually Decision 826 includes stipulations on such non-residential use and encourages the refurbishing of buildings as "eastern style" restaurants, cafes, and hotels to promote tourism in the Old City. Investors, in turn promote the non-residential use of courtyard houses as preservation of heritage. Their argument upholds notions that inhabitants of the old city are not the original residents and would leave given the chance to live in an apartment. They also argue that the annual

⁷ The law has several previous incarnations. According to one informant an earlier law that attempted to restrict leases to two years was opposed by developers who saw this as encouraging people to rent instead of purchasing apartments and would lead to a decline in profit from real estate. As a matter of fact not many were concerned when the law came into effect in 2004 thinking that like other government legislature it will be met with wide opposition from specific interest groups that will repel it. However, and according to my knowledge this has not happened.

maintenance of courtyard houses make them impractical as homes and that restaurants or hotels are more convenient since they generate income that can be re-invested in the building and ensure their viability.

Conclusion

The policies set forth for the protection of the built environment in the Old City of Damascus are contradictory in their attempt to preserve the Old City. For the most part they do not take into account that historic center is a vibrant inhabited community when they focus on heritage. People who live and work in the Old City do not consider themselves living in museum or in houses that are heritage. Rather they see their courtyard houses as homes and in need of specific modifications to make them compatible with modern life. Therefore, neglecting the social aspect in the preservation guidelines has contributed to the contradictions in official attempts at protecting the heritage site from modernization. Today these attempts are further complicated by the increase of tourism activities in the Old City where the issue of preservation is put aside in favor of investment in courtyard houses for non-residential use such as restaurants and hotels. Thus there is continual neglect of the social aspect of the Old City which could result in a depopulated heritage site.

Fortunately there are many architects, engineers and officials in Syria who are aware of the dangers of depopulation and the randomness of the preservation that is currently taking place in the Old City. They speak against an open air museum and work to maintain the historic center as a vibrant urban community. But today they are faced with the new obstacle in the form of investment capital that is hard to combat as many owners are tempted to sell as the value of their property doubles or even triples. With

cooperation from international organizations, some programs are being put in place to provide low interest loans for owners to maintain their homes. However, the speed at which house are being sold to investors and rate they are converted to non-residential use is creating a new reality that officials and urban planners have not yet caught up with.