



14 PRESERVING OLD NEIGHBORHOODS OF DAMASCUS, SYRIA

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Introduction

The urban form of Arabic-Islamic cities received much attention by Orientalists in the early part of this century. This interest rested on their belief that these cities are different from medieval Western cities and cities of other civilizations. The old organic urban form is gradually disappearing in favor of a more Western form where narrow and meandering streets are being torn up in favor of a transportation network that can support much higher densities. People who lived in old houses, with their shaded central court yards and water fountains, are moving to live in high-rise apartment buildings. The new urban form is not necessarily offering a better living environment. The spatial organization of old neighborhoods, with their associated mixture of land use hierarchies, is not being recreated in the new areas.

There are many reasons for this change. The rapid pace of urbanization in many of the Middle Eastern countries has created tremendous development pressures on their cities. As a result, they grew rapidly (Mahayni 1990). This growth was not matched by expansion of their public infrastructure and other needed urban facilities. In addition, changing life styles have generated new demands on housing. The extended family often resided in the same neighborhood. Married brothers, with their families, lived together and with their parents in old Damascene houses. Their house is usually surrounded by the houses of their cousins and other relatives. Neighborhoods were close-knit and often associated with familial ties. Many of these families are finding it necessary to move to separate dwelling units, and often to different neighborhoods.

In addition, urbanization pressures started to increase rapidly since World War II. These added pressures for housing and public infrastructure facilities were accommodated through infill development within the city, and with new subdivisions in the green-belt areas surrounding the city. The old Damascene house was not rebuilt in these areas and was replaced by a much higher density offered by high-rise apartment buildings.

Planners of the city faced a serious dilemma. On the one hand, they realized that old neighborhoods, and their historic structures, are being torn down in favor of the much more dense infill development called for by previous city plans, and that by pursuing this approach they were destroying a cultural heritage that will be very hard to replace in the future. On the other hand, development pressures and economic realities of the time were forcing them to go to much more dense developments in order to meet the increasing demand for housing. Thus, housing shortages, overcrowding, traffic congestion, pollution, among many other urban problems,

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started to emerge at alarming rates (El-Shakhs and Amirahmadi 1993).

This crisis has led many local urban planners and architects to search for resolutions to these problems through studying the past achievements of these cities. Many of them started to value the need of **adapting**, rather than **adopting**, the turn-of-the-century physical planning approaches of the West in dealing with the development of their cities, and realized that socio-economic, physio-geographic and cultural factors have to be integrated in their design. Cities are the product of their times. Past achievements do not offer any guarantees for success today. Nevertheless, old neighborhoods in these cities are disappearing, and their heritage deserves further study before they are lost forever.

Orientalists

The Marcais brothers (1928, 1945) are often cited as two of the earliest Orientalist researchers to describe the characteristics of Arabic-Islamic cities. Based on their studies of cities in the Maghreb, North Africa, they argued that Islam is an urban religion, and that Islamic cities were founded by new powers and caliphs. Their urban form consisted of Jami (mosque) with a close-by Suq (market/bazaar) and Hammam (public bath). George Marcais (1945) agreed with his brother William that Islam is an urban religion, and that a Friday mosque is a must for a city to be considered "Islamic." He added that there are other qualities to Islamic cities: separation of residential areas from markets, the organization of neighborhoods according to ethnic or religious groups, and the presence of a hierarchy of markets where the "clean" ones are located closer to the mosque.

Another French Orientalist, Jean Sauvaget, (1941, 1949) focused his attention on the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, Syria. He discovered that these cities had a geometric design which disintegrated later during the Byzantine Empire. He also noted the presence of a linear market, a Friday mosque, and a central square that connects to meandering alleyways which lead to other commercial or residential areas.

The work of Gustave Von Grunebaum (1955) on Islam in general, and Arabic-Islamic cities in particular, received much attention by many scholars. He attempted to integrate the works of the earlier French Orientalists. He indicated that the Friday mosque is usually located at the intersection of major thoroughfares, and reiterated the presence of ethnic separation of residential areas cited earlier by the Marcais brothers. He also noted the lack of civic city-wide municipal organizations.

Von Grunebaum was severely criticized by Abu-Lughod (1987), AlSayyad (1991), and Said (1978). Abu-Lughod (1987) was critical. She noted that he depended on previous research without any critical evaluation of it, and she argued that much of the earlier works by Orientalists on Arabic-Islamic cities present a "model of products rather than processes." Said (1979: 299) was even more critical. He

accused him of triviality and of having the "us" and "them" mentality, and he described his understanding of Islam as that of "the earlier European Orientalists—monolithic, scornful of ordinary human experience, gross, reductive, unchanging."

Much of the above literature on Arabic-Islamic cities suffers from a number of shortcomings. First, there is no consensus on what we mean by an Islamic city? Does the term "Islamic," the way it is used in the literature, convey the same meaning as when it is used in, for example, "Islamic Sharia" (Islamic jurisprudence) where it has a definite meaning? Some argue that most Islamic cities were inherited from earlier civilizations, and that the Islamic World is not a monolithic world. Yet, at the same time, they admit that Islam has influenced the urban form of these cities. Second, much of the emphasis in this literature is on the physical form and the spatial organization of these cities where, mostly, only highly aggregated central city functions are considered. Cities, however, are complex systems of interacting socio-economic, political, religious, cultural as well as legal processes. The interactions among these processes are reflected in the physical form.

Third, this highly aggregated approach ignores linkages among the various districts within a city, or interactions within the district itself. Cities are made of neighborhoods and districts, and their associated different land-use hierarchies. Their spatial organization give these cities their urban form. Residential districts, for example, have their own hierarchies of mosques, markets, and other activities. They interact with each other and with other activities in other districts. Finally, much of this literature is based on specific case studies of a particular city or region in the Islamic world, and the results of these studies are generalized to other Islamic cities.

The above criticism attracted a new wave of interest in the latter part of this century where socio-economic-political, anthropological, and legal studies were attempting to gain better understanding of Arabic-Islamic cities. Examples of such studies are the ones made by Lapidus (1967, 1969, 1973) on the cities of Damascus and Aleppo during the Mamluk dynasty. Lapidus did not consider cities as artifacts. Rather, he focused his attention on the interactions among residential and commercial areas. Hourani and Stern (1970) also investigated social relations and how these relations are influenced by a hierarchical structure stretching from the local to the universal. Besim Hakim's classic study (1986) was more on the legal aspects of the urban form of these cities, and he documented how Islamic legislation impacted them. He argued that this legislative approach was one of the primary reasons for the urban form of these cities.

Hameed (1991) argues that there is another wave of new literature calling for the need to return to the original sources of Islam for an understanding of the design of these cities. Khalidi (1984), for example, questions the wisdom of considering Islam as an urban religion. He uses the Q'uran and Hadith (the sayings of the prophet) to document his point. Haider (1984) proposes that in order to understand the structure of Islamic cities one has to look at them as moral

communities where responsibility, justice, purpose, cultivation of nature, knowledge and creativity are keys to their existence.

The above suggests that an understanding of what makes a city "Islamic" has not remained constant over time, and that the concept, as a concept, is still evolving. Scholarship in this area is becoming increasingly more interdisciplinary, and the focus is no more only on the physical environment, but, in addition, on the institutions and their interactions as they manifest themselves in this environment.

The Old Neighborhoods of Damascus

Damascus is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities of the world. It goes back more than 6000 years, and parts of the old wall of the city is still standing. Damascus was always an important city in the region, and has always served as one of its major urban centers. It was the capital of the Ommayad dynasty for more than a century and a half. Many of the old neighborhoods of Damascus survived over the centuries despite the suffering they experienced through many invasions and occupations by foreign powers as early as the days of Alexander the Great and as late as the days of the French occupation till the mid-forties.

Safouh Khier (1982) notes that the physical make-up of the old city was influenced by a variety of factors that go beyond its topography. He indicates that security reasons have played an important role in generating its urban form. In addition to the wall surrounding the city, with its seven gates, each district inside the wall had its own physical characteristics that distinguished it from other districts in the city. Some neighborhoods had what resembles a cul-de-sac where members of extended families, or families that share a village origin or belief, live in different houses in this cul-de-sac and are able to lock the gate at its entrance at night for extra security.

Security was even more of a concern in the districts which started to emerge outside the wall. The shape of the meandering streets' form is often explained in terms of the need for security. Having a specific address is relatively a recent phenomenon, and one had to know exactly the location he intends to visit. Strangers in the neighborhood are easily recognized. Many of the houses did not have outside windows in the first floor which open to the alleyways. Those houses that have such windows cover them with iron rods and wooden shutters for both security and privacy reasons. Most houses, and especially those of the well-to-do families, compensate for the narrowness of this street pattern by having larger houses with open court yards and water fountains, and they landscape it with local plants and citrus trees. Alleyways often terminate into squares where local mosques and markets locate.

Environmental factors also played a major role in the design of these neighborhood. Some would argue that these old urban forms are more sensitive to the local environmental conditions than the new ones (Olabi 1982). Temperature in Damascus can get, for example, to more than 100 Fahrenheit degrees in

the summer. Yet, pedestrians walking in the alleyways will not be exposed directly to the sun. The walls on either side of the alleyway are two stories high, and they often shade it from direct exposure to the sun. These alleyways were also designed with due respect to air movements and currents. They tend to be much cooler than other areas in the summer.

Mosques served as a spatially organizing factor in shaping the urban form of the old neighborhoods. In addition to their religious function, mosques also served an educational function in their neighborhoods (Allaf 1983). The hierarchy of mosques is not that much different from the hierarchy of a school system introduced much later by Perry earlier in this century. The local neighborhood mosque is the smallest, and it is used for all prayers except the Friday noon prayer. The Jima (Friday) mosque tends to be larger and serves a district. The Eid mosque is the largest one, aside from the city-wide mosque, and most zones of the city tend to have more than one Jima or Eid mosque depending on their size.

Markets are also associated spatially with mosques and tend to locate close to them. They have their own hierarchy, and their threshold and range are a function of the area they serve (Shihabi 1990). Again, you have here the local neighborhood markets where convenience shopping is made, and these markets are spread all over the district. Larger markets tend to locate on arterial streets and closer to Eid mosques. They offer a variety of goods and services to the district. Local markets locate, in addition to the arterial street, in open squares spread around in the various neighborhoods of the district. Some zones also have specialized city-wide markets. The district of Midan, for example, served for a long time as the central grain market for Damascus (Khier 1982). Grain merchants located their offices and warehouses along its major arterial.

Various areas within different districts and zones in old Damascus are associated with ethnic or religious groups or with familial or tribal associations. A strong communal sense is quite prevalent in many of them. These socio-cultural factors influenced where people live, and affected their integration within the community. There is a district in Damascus, for example, named the Kurdish district. The majority of the residents of this district are from Kurdish origin. There is another district, Kassa, where the majority of the people in it are Christians. You will also find members of large extended families locating close to each other within a neighborhood. The neighborhood becomes known and associated with the name of the family. This is not the case anymore. Old cohesion of these neighborhoods is disappearing, and families are moving to newer developments.

M. Ecochard is a well known name to many residents of Damascus. He is the French architect/planner who worked on the 1937 plan and returned in 1963 to formulate another plan for the city. The first plan was, to a large extent, a city beautiful type of a plan except for not allocating enough green space and parks. Emphasis was on establishing a modern transportation network to serve the ever increasing number of automobiles in the city. Damascus was always known for

being surrounded by orchards and green fields. The first plan called for re-designing old established neighborhoods and starting new residential subdivisions by invading these orchards and fields.

A new street system was planned for the old neighborhoods. The plans were made as if the existing neighborhoods did not exist, and that one was planning for raw land, except for preserving some old historic structures. These plans established new real estate economic realities where demand for land was much higher than the available supply. Land became much more expensive, and no incentives were offered to maintain existing old neighborhoods or structures. As the development process started to accelerate, the process of transformation intensified. Old neighborhoods are not old anymore. They became a mixture of old and new as apartment buildings started to replace old houses. The local government became more aggressive, and started to give notices to residents in certain areas to vacate their houses during a specific period to initiate new development. Others responded to housing shortages by tearing their houses down and building new apartment buildings as the new plan allowed. This process of transformation has been taking place for decades, and it is expected to continue for many more.

In addition to the infill development the 1937 and 1963 plans called for new subdivision developments around the edges of the city. Al-Zahera district was developed east of and parallel to the Midan district. The Mezza district, south west of Damascus and outside it, was also developed. It started as a residential area for families with limited income, and mushroomed into a major suburb which was annexed to Damascus later. Similar developments were also initiated in Barzeh, Khafersousa, and Dummer, nearby small towns sharing borders with Damascus. Both Barzeh and Khafersousa were also annexed to Damascus.

Many of the above developments took place in fragmented ways. They were designed as residential developments by themselves with little regards to the overall development of other needed land uses or basic urban infrastructure. The comprehensive plan of 1963 is currently being updated as a result of discovering the numerous shortcomings of this fragmented approach.

The Case of Midan

Midan is one of the largest districts of Damascus. It is located on the southern parts of the city, and it grew over the years in a linear fashion extending for about three kilometers from the central area of Damascus along a twenty meters arterial street. It is the only linear district in the old city. Small farms and orchards used to surround it in the early part of this century. The neighborhoods of the district stretch from either side of the arterial for about one kilometer. Midan originally started as a suburb to Damascus during the early days of the Ottoman Empire outside the walled part of the city. It is more than a thousand years old.

Many of its original residents are migrants, and its rise is often explained by two major reasons. First, by being the southern entryway to the city, residents of Midan have always had strong relations with the farmers of the southern part of the country. Many of its residents trace their roots to this part of Syria. Farmers brought their grain to the city, and sold it to the grain merchants of Midan. The urban-rural linkages of this district were the strongest in Damascus, and they were not replicated in any other district of the city. This linkage influenced the type of economic activities that take place in the district. Most of the grain merchants in the city are located in this district, and a number of rural-related activities serving rural visitors dotted its arterial street. In addition, the district housed some central city-wide rural-related markets such as the farm animal markets and the major slaughterhouse serving the city.

The second reason also relates to its location being the southern entryway to the city. Pilgrimage caravans to the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, with pilgrims from Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, as well as some other pilgrims from other Muslim Asian countries, used to gather in Midan and start their trip to Mecca from the district annually. This special function gave Midan prestige, and with it came the responsibility of being a good host. The district used to get transformed during the pilgrimage season twice: when the trip is initiated to Mecca, and when the pilgrims returned from Mecca. This function started to disappear a few decades ago with the introduction of new transportation modes.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of mosques in Midan around the turn of the century. All of these mosques still exist today, and they are protected as historic landmarks. A number of small, local, mosques have disappeared over the years and very little is known about them (Olabi 1982). Mosques served as the focal point of their neighborhoods and districts. Residents in the areas surrounding them, although free to pray at any mosque, frequent their mosque regularly and they tend to pray in the same mosque most of the time. Jima and Eid mosques also served during that time an educational function. Kids received special instructions on how to read and write, and regular specialized religious classes were usually offered every day.

The markets that existed in Midan around the turn of the century still exist today. Their distribution at the time is shown in Figure 2. Most of the markets, aside from the small neighborhood ones, are located on the major arterial street, and in close proximity to Jima or Eid mosques as illustrated in Figure 3. Local markets tend to be closer to neighborhoods and they locate in squares which connect the alleyways to each other. These markets concentrate on convenience shopping items and offer little variety in their supplies. Besides the markets, the arterial street served other commercial functions which, in some cases, were city-wide functions. Grain merchants located their offices and warehouses on both sides of the arterial.

These distributions reinforce a strong community sense common to these areas. Residents knew each other, and their

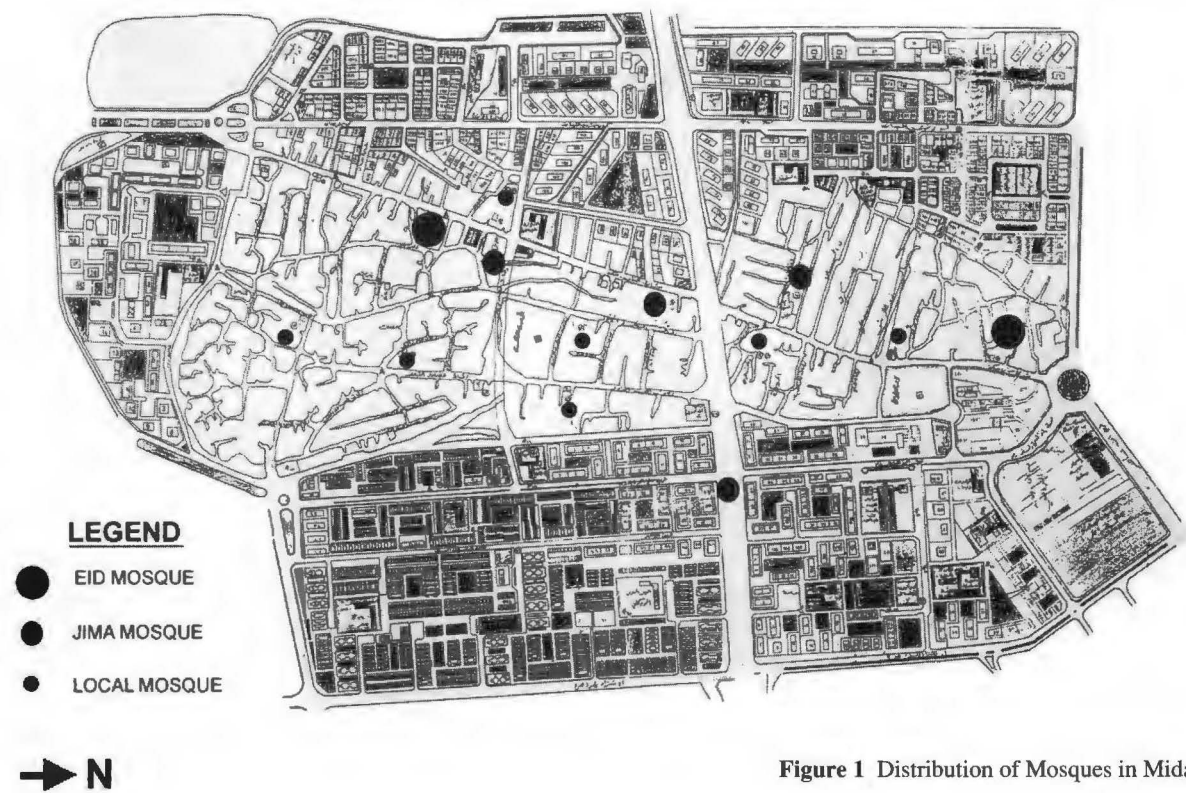


Figure 1 Distribution of Mosques in Midan

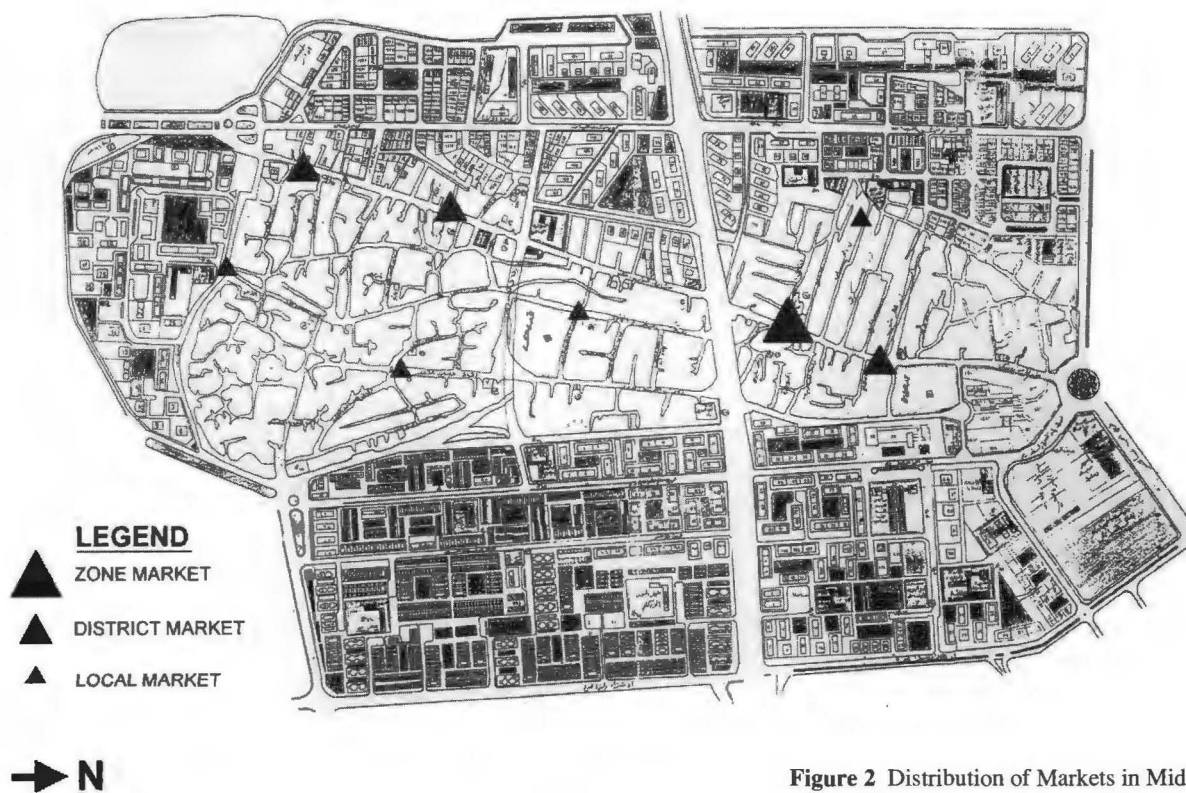


Figure 2 Distribution of Markets in Midan

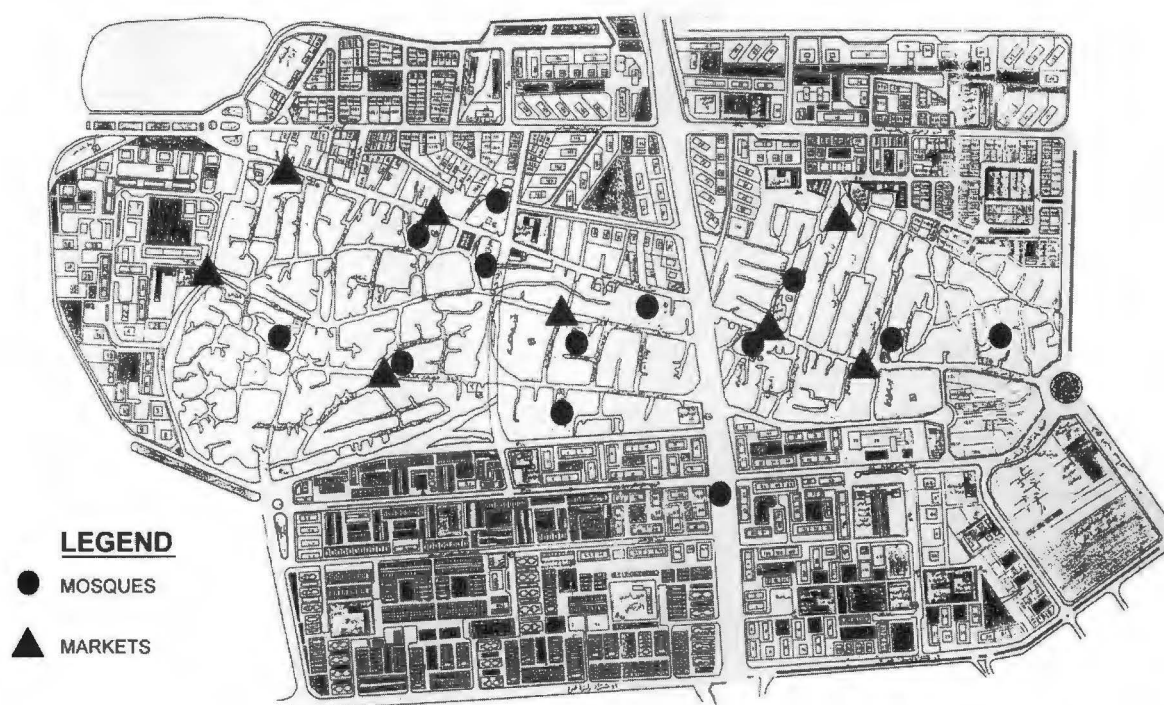


Figure 3 Mosque and Market Relationships in Midan

families have been living in the district for a long time. They pray in the same mosque, shop in the same market, and their kids play in the neighborhood squares and its alleyways.

Development pressures started affecting Midan more than sixty to seventy years ago. A new arterial street was paved about half a kilometer to the west of the old one, and a new linear residential developments started to emerge on both sides of this arterial. A similar development was initiated a few decades later on the east side of the district. Currently, the total population of the zone is estimated about one million, and it is considered as the largest zone in the city.

The contrast between the old and the new neighborhoods is, at best, startling. Originally, the new developed areas were planned as residential areas, and no other land-uses were permitted. Residents of the new areas have found it necessary, to this day, to do their convenience shopping in the old neighborhoods of the district. In time, garages were transformed to shops, and new construction was allowed to devote the first floor of the high-rise buildings for commercial and professional office use. A rigid grid-iron street pattern was platted with little open space or play areas, especially in the early parts of the development. Development pressures started to move into the old neighborhood themselves. New subdivisions were designed and superimposed on existing development. The municipality took over and bulldozed some of these neighborhoods and redistributed the land, according to established shares of ownership, to the resident population. New construction had to follow the adopted plan and the new subdivisions were designed accordingly. Other neighborhoods were allowed to exist for a while. If residents wished, however, to bulldoze their old homes and re-build them they

had to follow the new subdivision layout for that part of the zone. As such, much of the old zone lost its charm, and its urban form is disintegrating into a mixture of old and new.

Conclusions

Development pressures over the past few decades have destroyed much of the old neighborhoods of Damascus. The old neighborhoods in the central part of the city, within the old walled city, started receiving more attention. Planners, architects, and many other professionals and civic leaders, initiated a strong campaign to preserve this city heritage. They were able to convince the members of the People's Assembly, Parliament, to stop future development in the old neighborhoods closest to the city-center pending further study and investigation of the need to preserve the area as a historic district. The outcomes of this effort are encouraging at this stage. But, the economic pressures to develop the area are too strong to ignore.

Old neighborhoods at the edge of the city, outside the old walled part of the city, were not included in the moratorium. Initially, the development pressure in Midan started in the small farms and orchards adjacent to it, but not in the old neighborhoods themselves. In time, the development pressures moved into these neighborhoods and they began slowly losing their urban form. One has to admit that the mixture of the old and the new urban forms, together and superimposed on each other, is producing a city-scape with no urban form. In addition, the strong sense of a community is disappearing after surviving for hundreds of years.

How did this happen? The process started around the forties and fifties when local architects, civil engineers, and a few planners adopted a strict physical planning approach to the development of the city. They assumed, literally, that they were planning raw land, and existing land use conditions did not influence their design.

In addition, a total vision for the future development of the city was lacking. The population growth of the city has consistently exceeded the forecasts made for this growth, including those made for the 1937 and 1963 plans. Thus, existing plans needed continuous updating in order to cope with the ever changing planning environment. A micro approach focusing on the design of subdivisions replaced the macro comprehensive vision offered by the comprehensive plan. Very large residential subdivisions were planned in isolation from each other, and literally as residential areas. Interactions among subdivisions or between different land uses were not addressed. Market demands, initially for convenience shopping, forced the use of side walks for this purpose, and in time introduced such shops in haphazard ways to these areas. Many residents of these new areas still go the old neighborhoods to do their shopping.

Communities that survived for centuries are being lost to this "modernization." This "modernization" process is ignoring the cultural needs to replace these lost communities with new ones that respect communal values and heritage. Most streets, because of the high density, are wide arterial streets. Desirable residential properties are considered to be those located on the arterial. The traditional sense of a quite cohesive Damascene neighborhood is being replaced by major, noisy and polluted arterial. These arterials separate residents from each other. They are quite unfriendly to pedestrians. Kids cannot play in their neighborhoods anymore. Security was the issue in the old days. Safety is the issue now.

Author's Note

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