

THE POLITICS AND PRACTICES OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Positioning the Material Past
in Contemporary Societies

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I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2014 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada
Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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Library of Modern Middle East Studies 101

ISBN: 978 1 84885 535 9

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



*This book is dedicated in memory of our beloved friend
'Ali Maher, the Sheikh of Amman*

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'AL-MADINA AL-QADIMA' OF DAMASCUS: PRESERVATION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE, REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST, AND THE PRODUCTION OF A VALUABLE SPACE*

Domenico Copertino

This chapter is concerned with the production of an urban *arrière-pays*, by means of state and private investments of capital and imagination, in the Old City (*al-madina al-qadima*) of Damascus, Syria. As Vincent Crapanzano (2004) has shown in his latest work, social actors use their individual and public to build their 'elsewhere', or *arrière-pays*, linked with past experiences and with future intentions. Imagination, as recent studies by Appadurai (1996; 2001a; 2001b), Hannerz (1980; 1991¹) and Anderson (1991) maintain, is a strong and effective means for people to interpret their social worlds and to drive their lives towards an expected future. In other terms, imagination produces reality: products of imagination are the real thing.

I will argue that the investment of imagination, in addition to that of different forms of specific capital (Bourdieu, 1992), is leading social actors, economic investors, local authorities and international institutions towards the construction of an urban *arrière-pays*, called the Old City, in the centre of Damascus. Deeply involved in such process are Unesco policies aimed at building a world heritage of places and cultures, and promoting site-preservation and development practices.

The Old City of Damascus was long considered a deteriorating and marginalised area. Since the last period of Ottoman domination (Pellitteri 2004, 154–7, 162–4; Hudson, 2006), and in particular during the French mandate (1920–46), the modern districts developed separately from the ancient town. As in other French protectorates, urban designers experimented in Damascus with a possible form of modern hierarchy: they found this in the separation of the Old City from the *ville nouvelle*: French settlements, where Mandate administrators and European technicians would live and work (Issawi, 1969), were to be built close to the former city, but sharply split off from it (Rabinow, 1989). The image of the *ville nouvelle* would have faced the Syrian city, whose integrity the French designers, out of respect, forebore to undermine.²

The French administration banned building and reconstruction work in Syria's ancient cities, and imposed some constraints on restoration work. While showing respect for local building traditions, the Mandate imposed the preservation of former settlements, where modernisation was banned (Wright 1991). This preserved the image of social hierarchy, dividing Syrians from the French.³

It was a principle of the French Mandate that France should not be considered a colonial power, but a protector country wielding its authority over local affairs on behalf of Syria's Sunni majority. The Mandate showed respect for local culture yet it stressed – through building avenues and European-style buildings – the benefits of civilisation.

In the Mandate period, Damascenes began to turn their backs on living in the Old City, because of the inadequacy of facilities (*khadimat*) there. According to the architectural historian Moafaq Dughman, former director of *Mudiriyyat al-madina al-qadima* (Directorate for the Old City, later MMQ), whom I interviewed several times in 2005, this situation led to well-off people buying property in other areas; as the underprivileged were unable to move out of the Old City (*tila'*), so the idea of it as a poor and marginal area caught on. However, in the 1990s the Old City of Damascus 'came back', as a result of different groups' converging interests, and of an important development: in 1979 Unesco placed the ancient parts of Damascus on the World Heritage List (WHL), which stimulated capital investment in the area throughout the following decades – the Syrian government and the Damascus regional council (*muhafaza*) promoted investment in tourism and in the restoration of the principal monuments; potential land values rose, and many Syrian investors moved their capital from less safe sectors (e.g. foreign trade with Middle Eastern partners under embargo or at war, such as Iraq, Iran or Lebanon) to real estate and building restoration; damaged buildings were converted into hotels, houses, restaurants, coffee shops, ateliers, art galleries and cultural amenities.

The verb phrase 'come back' is used here to translate the term by which the protection planners refer to the dynamics affecting the Old City: 'come back' (*raj'a*) is often related to other expressions such as *sahwa* ('awakening'), *wa'i* ('awareness') and *islah* ('gentrification'). As I will argue, these are not neutral terms: on the contrary, they show institutions' specific stance in the socio-political arena concerned with the preservation of cultural heritage.

Gentrification

The gentrification of the Old City of Damascus, namely the transformation of the area from a marginal district into a suitable area for the middle and upper classes (Smith 1982), started in the 1990s, as did a similar process in other Middle Eastern cities.

On-going economic liberalisation (al-Hamwy, 1992; Wedeen, 1999; Kientle, 1994; Heydemann, 1999; George, 2003; Hinnebusch, 2001) has allowed many investors to enter the real-estate market. The rehabilitation of old houses did not require large capital investment, so it attracted many middle-class people, who bought cheap buildings and used them for work, to live in or as an investment. At the same time, former owners of the big Arab dwellings in the Old City returned to them, opening coffee shops, restaurants and hotels. Many were members of the rich and powerful politicians' and traders' families that built these luxurious dwellings, living in them until the end of the nineteenth century (Weber, 2004; 1997–98; 1999; Pellitteri, 2004). Over the first decades of the twentieth century, however, they moved away because of the deterioration and the overspill of the Old City, moving to other areas, chiefly in the suburbs.

Since the 1990s (Wilson, 2004; Salamandra, 2004) large volumes of capital have been invested in the central urban districts, and as a result the latter's economic value has risen; middle-upper income groups moved there to live and work, thus contributing to the rehabilitation of the area. Land values, real-estate prices and rents rose in turn, and this led many older residents to move out towards other urban areas, where costs were lower. I treat these 'older residents' as belonging to one of two groups: on the one hand those few people still living in the houses their ancestors built or bought in the nineteenth century and who managed to stay there until the 1990s, when the gentrification of the Old City started; and, on the other hand, low-income groups of so-called *fellahim* (peasants) from the countryside near Damascus, of migrants from other Syrian districts, and of refugees from Golan and Palestine after Arab-Israeli wars. During the twentieth century these groups moved to Damascus Old City, where they found free or cheap housing, occupying or often renting small sections of the houses from which

wealthy families had fled with the sprawl of the *ville nouvelle*. The displacement of these low-income groups is the final and most dramatic outcome of gentrification.

Here I examine the practices and imaginaries of five groups of gentrifiers: Syrian investors in the restoration and development of ancient buildings, often owners of restored venues, cultural amenities and tourist facilities in the Old City; Syrian and European employees of Unesco who, with political backing, strongly support the historical value of Damascus' ancient buildings; Syrian officials and employees of bureaux supervising cultural heritage; highly educated Syrian and European architects, advocates of the value of authenticity; 'new residents' (*illi bidakkkhalu*, literally 'incomers'), advocates of such qualities as 'naturalness', 'habitability' and the like, and often lovers of orientalist literature, who choose a lifestyle that provides them with status and self-esteem – they are an affluent group in terms of socio-economic status (middle and upper-middle class), employment and educational levels (intellectuals, artists, civil servants, small businessmen), as well as in their needs, wishes and *habitus*.⁴ They feel glad to be living away from other more chaotic districts, and united in the cause of rehabilitating decayed areas of the city; they gain economic benefits (the sharing of resources and labour, and, if they are in business, of customers) and political benefits (the making of common cause in petitioning for services and infrastructure); some are master masons (*mu'allimun*) and carpenters, holders of technical knowledge and social relations, exploiting buildings and materials as their means of support.

Different forms of specific capital are staked by social, economic and institutional actors in this arena: investors' money; the political capital of international institutions (Unesco, the Agha Khan Award for Architecture, later AKAFa); master masons' technical and social capital; architects' scientific and educational capital; and new residents' symbolic capital, linked with space and dwelling habits.

Unanimously identified as stakeholders in the development of the cultural heritage, the five groups identified above (investors, Unesco employees, institutional actors, architects, new residents) are here taken together as *mustahmarin* (literally 'developers'); with this term, indeed, Damascenes imply on the one hand the strict sense of the word and on the other the broad sense: those who contribute to the development of cultural heritage. Master masons and carpenters, although contributing to the development through their work, are not included in this category. An intrusive ethnographic glance at these groups' values (part of their social imaginaries) and an analysis of the capital staked to enhance them, cast light over the ways these imaginaries are embodied in the lives and activities of different actors.

All these actors cooperate in the construction of an actual *arrière-pays*, bringing to the process their specific capital and their public imaginaries. The latter are not simply mind constructs applied to the physical reality (i.e. the built environment; see Low, 1996; Lawrence and Low, 1990), as if it would exist before, after and in spite of them: as has been shown by Henry Lefebvre (1978) (and by studies drawing on his *Production of the Space*, such as Smith, 1982; 1987; Harvey, 1993; Zukin, 1987; Kaika, 2005), public imaginaries are among the building materials of the urban environment. Social actors involved in the construction, restoration and circulation of the spatial objects that make up the locality called the 'Old City' use building materials presented as 'traditional'. They command, in addition to stone, wood, earth and sand, a set of values – exchange value, the values of tradition, historicity, identity and the like – nourished by public imaginaries and enhanced by specific types of capital, objectified and embedded in the space as though they were walls and beams, through social actors' strategies, investments and working patterns.

Strategies of objectification: the WHL and the reification of experiences and relations

Like building materials, public imaginaries are embedded in spaces; the public imaginary related to world heritage is incorporated in spaces through strategies of objectification and localisation. It is worth investigating such strategies in order to understand the ways imagination works in people's daily lives, and how an imagined place – one site of the WHL – becomes the actual place in which people live and act.

The ancient districts of Damascus officially became a 'heritage' (*turath*) site in 1979, when Unesco, after a survey by André Chastel, Henry Millon and Jean Taronon, decided to include the area in the WHL. The public imaginary of cultural heritage is grounded in ideas of history, authenticity and tradition (Clifford, 2002; Fischer, 1986; Palumbo, 2003), nostalgia (Bissell, 2005; Bettini, 1992; Herzfeld, 1991; Luz, 2006) and dwelling habits. These are fields of human experience and relations, of sentiments and social knowledge – realities that become 'cultural goods' only when they are recognised in certain items, objects on which one can gaze, which can be touched, tasted, handled. As a result, choice of dwelling, frequently found in certain areas inhabited by certain groups, become the latter's 'architectural traditions'. But are those groups united in choosing such settlement models? Do the choice of one model and the abandonment of another, the production and reproduction of models, the working patterns of model production, come through as linear phenomena, or do they introduce conflicts,

exclusions, hierarchies? The objectification of experience, knowledge and sentiments is possible only when such internal distinctions and conflicts are set aside, and when those fields of experience, that knowledge and those sentiments are reified. Cultural goods, part of cultural heritage, are the result of the essentialisation of one group's building practices and knowledge; the process involves the setting-aside of distinctions, hierarchies and internal conflicts in production processes.

On a global scale, Unesco is the main institutional actor promoting the transformation of architectural, monumental and territorial products into cultural heritage. Buildings, monuments, urban and rural sites are products of social work; their objectification and transformation into cultural 'goods' requires the removal of the record of that work, the setting-aside of the internal distinctions, disputes, materiality and time peculiar to the production process. Buildings, monuments and sites are *products* of social work; through their transformation into cultural heritage, they become the creations of an abstract entity called 'humanity'. Indeed, Unesco cooperates with other international organisations in the construction of an ideal human community grounded in cultural goods (monuments, groups of buildings, geological formations, natural sites) that are declared expressions of a 'universal value' (Palumbo, 2006, 344). Such cultural goods are inserted into the imaginary global space called WHL, where they become icons of humanity's creative skill. After the first Unesco survey in Damascus, in 1953, envoys wrote that beside being a national heritage Damascus architectural sites were owned by humanity at large, which should treat them as goods deserving conservation and protection (Collart et al, 1954).⁵ The greatness of Syria's history is visible and tangible in its monuments and objectified in its cultural goods and heritage. The value of such goods crosses national borders, becoming a quality that all humanity can appreciate.⁶ In order to be included in the WHL, an architectural object has to be an expression of the locality where it was produced and, at the same time, of the creative skill of the human spirit at large. As is shown by the passage referred to above, from the report by Collart et al, according to Unesco experts Damascus' ancient districts meet such expectations.

As will be shown below, a site's and its buildings' qualities of historicity and authenticity emerge from developers' strategies – strategies of objectification (carried out to embody history and tradition within certain 'authentic' objects); strategies of localisation (to set the limits of areas to be preserved for their historical quality, and excluding areas lacking this quality); the investment of symbolic capital (to make certain materials 'authentic'); working patterns of restoration and the production of cultural goods; administrative choices as to who qualify as authentic Old City inhabitants (called *illi bida-khbalu*, 'new residents' by their older neighbours).

Restorative architects in Damascus claim a concern for authenticity and an adhesion to Damascene building traditions: they put forward that claim as a factor in self-identification, in opposition to other architectural models such as those of the post-Mandate city. The AKAFa firmly upholds the adoption of 'Arab-Islamic' building traditions, to counter the damage done to the urban fabric by modernisation, and has funded a restoration project in Damascus Old City. Damascene architects involved in such projects claim their closeness to the principle the AKAFa has been supporting for several years. According to that organisation, Muslim architects should avoid imitating the West; Fazlur Khan stresses that modern European and American methods, forms and technology are 'so deceptively attractive to these countries ... that it is almost impossible to resist the temptation to copy [them] by and large' (1978, 32). As a consequence, according to Khan, glass, steel and concrete buildings quickly become ubiquitous; local culture, architecture and building traditions are disregarded.

The AKAFa ranks local heritage qualities above emulation and pro-Western leanings. A Damascene architect, supervisor of the AKAFa restoration project, told me an allegorical tale about imitation:

A crow saw a peacock and tried to mimic its elegant walk. It tried so hard it achieved its goal, but its peacock-like walk was bound to appear awkward and ridiculous. In the meantime, the crow forgot the way its own kind walk, so it spent the rest of its life hideously walking like a crow imitating a peacock.

At the first seminar on architectural transformations in the Islamic world, organised by the AKAFa in 1978 at Aiglemont, the participants (among whom were Sayyed Hossein Nasr, Jacques Berque, Zahir-ud Deen Khwaja and Janet Abu-Lughod) became aware that the urban Muslim world was going through a crisis, for which they held reformist movements, secular elites, Westernised architects and their customers responsible; they picked out (and to a certain extent essentialised) qualities of Muslim urban life that the crisis was destroying: harmony, space, sacredness, imagination, roots, origins, authenticity. Such qualities were met by their opposites – feelings of inferiority, attraction to the West – essentialised as modernisation and the loss of traditional values, acculturation, physical and spiritual deterioration.

Twelve years later, at a seminar held in Indonesia, the AKAFa admitted that, although secularisation and modernisation were still dangerous, a powerful rising tide was claiming a 'come-back to traditional values' and stressing spiritual values over crude materialism (Serageldin, 1990, 12).

The AKAFa's project in Damascus Old City meets some of the proposals Janet Abu-Lughod outlined at the Aiglemont seminar in 1978, to restore and develop ancient towns by recreating an 'architecture in the spirit of Islam'. According to her, this architecture has to be inspired by brotherhood, equity and mutual responsibility. Some of the principles Abu-Lughod put forward and the AKAFa accepted are that the restoration plan has to meet certain criteria: the site has to be empty, in a historically significant area, owned by the municipality and close to residential structures which need restoration; it must be established, by screening the population to be assisted, that residents have been living in the district for a long time, are eager to share in the experiment, the plan and the work, and that they include experts in building, carpentry and electrical work; the plan must take account of local population needs; public administration has to be involved; external funds may be raised by renting or selling premises to shopkeepers, warehouse-keepers and craftsmen.

Having awarded a prize to a famous Syrian architect's project for the development of the site, the AKAFa then organised the progress of the work. The main buildings being restored are *Bayt* ('home') *Nizam* and *Bayt Siba'i*, two huge nineteenth-century houses in the neighbourhood of Saghour; both buildings belong to the Syrian government, both are empty and stand in a damaged area of collapsed buildings. The AKAFa's aim is to convert both houses into hotels, to make the whole area a tourist attraction managed by the local population. The project is indeed being carried out by exploiting local expertise: the project started with a phase of six months (archeological surveys and on-site studies) directed by architect al-Berry from MMQ, who moved his office to *Bayt Siba'i* hall, where he works cheek by jowl with AKAFa experts. This will be followed by a two-year phase to carry the project forward, during which interaction with the local population will become closer: local craftsmen will be sold premises near the main houses; craftsmen and carpenters capable of restoring buildings will be found locally, and will be asked to find suppliers of high-quality materials. In the third phase, the restoration itself will be carried out, and then in the final phase the hotels will be set up; the AKAFa is entrusting the task of managing these to experts in the hotel business who live in the area and have previous experience in the management of cultural amenities.

Local experts are trusted by the AKAFa to act as authorities on authentic Damascene building traditions. They are in charge of reviving historical associations – or memories – of those traditions through the reproduction of a certain image of local architectural history. The owners of Old City buildings will draw on such images and memories to restore their premises. According to Michel Shatta, an informant interviewed in 2003 and an old

resident of *madina al-qadima*: 'People looking for ancient lifestyle in those venues don't find just fake tourist places; they sit down, eat, smoke *narghile*, look at the stones supposed to be ancient, and then they go away'.

Strategies of localisation: the boundary of historical associations

Unesco included the Old City of Damascus in the WHL after an inspection in 1978; its experts presented a report in which they stated the reasons of their choice (Chastel et al, 1979): the extraordinary artistic and aesthetic diversity of the Old City, the rarity and significance of its different structures, and the presence of 'historical associations'. The authors of the report noted that Damascus had been inhabited continuously for several millennia: this was the conclusive point for the inclusion of the 'Old City' in the WHL.

Unesco's recognition led the Syrian government to take two important decisions, which have underscored subsequent developments in the Old City. The first was to fix the boundaries of the areas of greatest historical relevance; the second was to put a public corporation in charge of protecting these areas. (The decisions were based on one interpretation of the Unesco mandate, and have been the subject of controversy.)

In the first place it was decided that the area of historical relevance was the part of the city enclosed by Nur al-Din's walls (Figure 5); this part of

the city, perceived as separate from the spreading *ville nouvelle* (Ecochard and Danger, 1936; Sauvaget, 1934; Thourmin, 1931), had already been cut off from the new city in the 1968 Banshoya-Ecochard urban plan (Ecochard, 1965a; 1965b; 1965c; Ecochard and Banshoya, 1968).

The part of the city inside the Nur al-Din walls was designated as the *madina al-qadima* par excellence. Whole quarters, such as al-Midan, Suq Sarruja, Amara Barraniya and Salhiya, although dating back to before the fall of the Ottoman Empire, were left out of the areas acknowledged as of historical value.⁷ Nowadays many individuals and groups contest this decision, claiming that other pre-Mandate districts should also benefit from Unesco's patronage. This is, for instance, the argument advanced by the Friends of Damascus Association (an NGO) in its campaign for the protection of the site where the huge Four Seasons Hotel stands. Further, a Damascene authoress, Siham Tergeman, stresses the historical value of the districts surrounding Suq Sarruja and Bahsa, to which she dedicated her 1994 novel *Daughter of Damascus*. A Unesco survey carried out in 2008 proposed enlarging the areas of historical relevance (Pini et al, 2008).

Secondly, with regard to the duty of public corporations in charge of protecting the *madina al-qadima* (the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums and the MMQ), a contradiction arises from the friction between the Unesco acknowledgment of the unceasing evolution of the city through five millennia, and the decision to conserve the present historical architectural structure of the Old City. To put this another way, the safeguard model is at odds with the traditional practice of reconstruction, as unceasing evolution is ingrained in the social and architectural features of the environment. In the jargon of gentrification workers, the verbs *rammama* ('restore') and *ammara* ('build') are virtual synonyms. Two corollaries stem from these deliberations: the first is that construction works involving building structures are forbidden in the Old City; the second is that the only materials allowed in the restorations are 'traditional' materials (*mauad taqidiyya*).

The main feature of the traditional Damascene dwelling was the juxtaposition of different blocks or parts giving onto a courtyard, each detached from each other and easily separated or cut off. In this way the built environment could easily adapt to changes made by the groups who inhabited it: for instance, variations in the number of households were accompanied by the addition or removal and sale of blocks. A household's decline in economic fortunes could be reversed by cutting out and selling off parts of the house; for instance in many *iwan* (the vault space which occupied the southern side of a Damascene house and overlooked the courtyard) the side overlooking the courtyard could be bricked up and the opposite side opened up onto the alley, so that the *iwan* could be turned into a workshop or store-room.



Figure 5. Damascus – the restored walls of Nur al-Din.

The built environment accommodated wider population movements too: in the former Jewish quarter many houses were adapted, through dividing-up and partitioning, to accommodate Palestinian refugee groups that came to Syria after 1948 and evacuees from the Golan Heights after 1967. Such readjustments were hampered, however, by the ban on new buildings in the Old City.

The second corollary leads to the enforcement of a law, brought in by the French Mandate administration in the 1920s, which forbids cement in building works in the ancient quarters. This law was widely ignored until 1996, when a new decision was issued to enforce the former; it regulates restoring and rebuilding activities in the Old City and is now a spectre haunting the *madina al-qadima*: police patrols and emissaries from MMQ ensure that this law is obeyed, and threaten transgressors with heavy fines or other disincentives. Local police patrols for the most part keep watch over continuous maintenance work on pre-gentrification properties, whereas employees from MMQ supervise the dwellings and other buildings of gentrifiers. The latter gain unhindered access to expensive traditional materials (*lebn, kels, teben, qeneh, khashb*), and using them becomes an integral part of their adhesion to the model of protecting building traditions. On the other hand, pre-gentrification inhabitants face difficulties in finding such materials (even if some of them find the idea of living in a fully 'traditional' environment attractive, according to gentrifiers' image of tradition), and many of them use cement and other forbidden materials for the routine maintenance of their houses.

Mise en valeur: the production of a valuable space

The foundation of the Old City's restoration was laid by the 1953 Unesco survey in Damascus; the subsequent report suggested that to preserve the area three main paths should be followed: conservation, education and development (*mise en valeur*) (Collart et al, 1954, 12). As has been argued above, norms of conservation stand in sharp contradiction to inhabitants' practices in transforming the built environment. Furthermore, such norms also contradict the will to develop the site – indeed, the main concern of the preservation authorities is to mediate between the need to protect a claimed architectural authenticity and the efforts of the chosen (or self-appointed) stakeholders of preservation to develop the site (again in the name of architectural authenticity).

Until the 1990s, only the first of the three paths was followed. The General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, and (where the *uaqf* properties were concerned) Protection Committees composed of authorities in antiquities, tourism, culture, the municipality and religious endowments,

restored the main buildings and monuments, such as the Umayyad Mosque and 'Azem Palace. However, Unesco's recommendation that the site should be developed remained on paper until the end of the 1980s, when several economic and political changes occurred, affecting the actions of both authorities and private citizens over the site.

Economical liberalisation and the opening to the global market (George, 2003; Hinnebusch, 2001) are making private investors interested in the cultural heritage; further, the recent major shifts in the economic relations between the countries in the area (caused by wars in Iraq and the break with Lebanon)⁸ have deprived Syria of its main regional commercial partners. This has led to a switching of the capital previously invested in international trade into the building sector and real estate – particularly, for the Old City, into the restoration market and gentrification. Builders and other investors involved in this sector benefit from the development of the damaged heritage. Besides historicity, authenticity and tradition – necessary for turning buildings into cultural goods – a new value enters the scene: the exchange value of architectural products. Experience, relations, knowledge and social sentiments, already objectified in the form of cultural goods, undergo a further shift: to commodification.

The transformation of cultural goods into commodities is not usually denounced by public opinion, except when cultural amenities are criminally mismanaged – after the plundering of the Baghdad Museum, for instance, the global sale of its Mesopotamian archaeological objects, through the eBay virtual market, was roundly condemned in the mass media.

Fortunately, no such delinquency has involved the groups of investors that contribute to the economic *mise en valeur* of the ancient Damascene districts. These investors are among those cooperating in the economic *mise en valeur* of the city's past, i.e. transforming the *madina al-qadima* into a 'valuable place'. In order to enhance the exchange value of the built environment, they stake specific capital, namely their money supply.

Beside investors there exist other groups that own specific capital and refer to other values, nevertheless concurring in the development of the Old City and the increase of its value: these groups are Unesco employees, officials from Syrian government bureaux, restoration architects, master masons and carpenters.

Investors 'coming in' (*al-mustatmarin illi bidakbbalu*) to the Old City and old residents 'getting out' (*al-sakinin illi bikbraju*) are at opposite ends of an arena in which several groups of social actors live and act: new and old residents continuing to live in the Old City and accommodating themselves to changes – Damascenes becoming small hoteliers and real-estate entrepreneurs who carry out partial restorations, university students, civil servants

and informal-sector workers moving to the Old City to live close to their place of work or study.

Investment of symbolic capital

Madina al-qadima is in the south-east of Damascus, and extends out towards Ghouta, the oasis surrounding the Syrian capital. The fertile soil of the oasis is watered by the Barada river and by its canals, dug in far-off times, that are distinctive features of the Damascene urban and rural landscapes; such watercourses supply the main resource for Damascus's agriculture. Ghouta has large numbers of poplars, olives, hazels, fruit trees (mainly apricots), vegetables, vineyards and cereals (Fisher, 1998; Bianquis, 1981). The Fije spring supplies urban households with water; the Barada valley and Ghouta supply wood in large amounts – poplar wood in particular was a building material until the late Ottoman era in the nineteenth century. The wood in an Arab home provides many *mustabmarin* with a strong symbolic basis for their self-identification with the space. Some *mustabmarin* groups stress the physical and symbolic properties of wood, among which is keeping temperatures cool in summer and warm in winter, while conveying sentiments of love and nostalgia to those living in the home. Considering that the Damascus region is marked by a continental climate, with very hot summers (above 38°C) and quite cold – often harsh – winters, one realises that the need for comfortable indoor temperatures leads people to emphasise the insulating properties of building materials. There is no suggestion here, however, of deterministically reducing the symbolic value of the space to the climatic features of the site: warmth, coolness, love and nostalgia are sensations and sentiments embedded in individuals' relations with their space and contribute to the shaping of group self-representations.

Living facilities in the Old City are commonly called *bayut 'arabi* ('Arab homes'): the term covers several products of social labour and several representations of a social world. An 'Arab home' is the objectification of such a world, and needs to be explained rather than accepted as an explicative category. For the physical description, in the following, of the most common living facilities in the Old City, I will use the terms 'home' and 'Arab home' to imply a general and quite abstract model, which includes some common physical features of the living facilities.

Conspicuous symbolic capital has been invested in the restoration of *Bayt Monthucon*, an ancient house in the neighborhood of Qemariah, in the Old City. This house was bought by Jacques Monthucon, Unesco architect, a few years ago. Simone Ricca, Unesco's contract architect charged with directing the restoration, intended to 'bring the house back' to its previous conditions,

before the modernisation carried out by the former owners in the 1950s. In this restoring site, among the others, I spent several days of my fieldwork: in these sites I was introduced to different teams of restorers, I could observe their strategies and working patterns, and I could follow their work starting from the very fundamentals of houses to be restored or rebuilt.

The internal walls of an Arab home are made by vertical beams called 'columns' standing on a horizontal one called 'pillow'. This skeleton is held by clay bricks and a compound of hay and corn called *lebn*. The vertical-horizontal framework of beams may be repeated two times for each wall. The walls are faced with sun-dried earth and hay sheets (*teben*) and a layer of lime (*keles*). This layer is covered with a mixture of water and sand (*vaml*), to absorb the humidity of lime. Once the wall has been smoothed, a layer of hemp fibre is placed over it as a thermal insulator. After that, the wall is painted with water-soluble distemper.

Usually, old residents replace *teben* sheets with cement and face the walls with enamel paint. Such coatings are often removed by *mustabmarin*, looking for 'authentic' (*asli*) walls and claiming certain features as typical of Damascene houses. This is what happens at *Bayt Monthucon*, where specific capital (Monthucon's money supply, Ricca's high-education capital, master masons' knowledge capital, MMQ supervisors' legal capital) is invested to help bring out such qualities of the house as 'traditionality', 'authenticity' and 'typicalness'.

In accordance with the criteria set by Unesco – both Ricca and Monthucon work for the organisation – to add ancient districts of Damascus to the WHL, in this restoration site *mustabmarin* are trying to dig up historical association, or memories. Further, they abide by such criteria when they look for rare details in this house, and generally appreciate the quality of rarity, to be found in the architecture.

At the top of the west wall of *ataba* there are two small windows of *januin*, a mixture of chalk and coloured glass, which lets light shine through its stitch-work (Figure 6). These windows are damaged, but Ricca decided not to remove them, because of their age, rarity and value (estimated at thousands of dollars, according to master-mason Mohammed Nimr Mustapha); today only two craftsmen manufacture them in Syria.

Authenticity, rarity, historicity: such qualities or values are embedded in the space, are mediated through the space and through the specific ways it is qualified and restored, and are expressed in the materials that compose the space. Those residents influenced by *mustabmarin* styles of restoration, whilst acknowledging the higher qualities of traditional materials, use more common materials such as enamel, cement and iron. Many of them indeed, whilst owning a remarkable 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1992) in

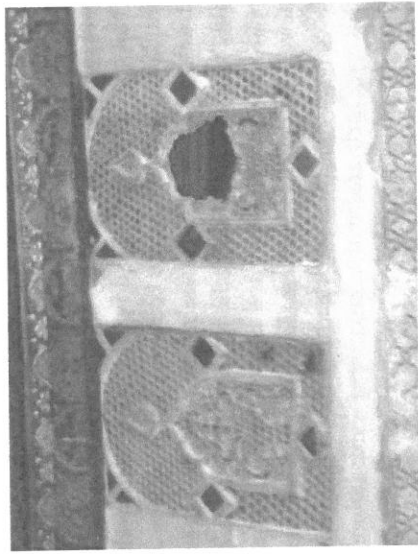


Figure 6. Looking for historical associations – *jansin* windows.

the qualities, characteristics and needs of the homes, lack the capital of money and social relations—essential for restoring their houses according to MMQ rules.

An old resident of the ancient neighbourhood of Bab Touma, Michel Shatta, recently restored his *ghourfa al-douyuf* ('guest room'). To reach it one crosses a neat courtyard, full of plants and birds. Shatta often complains that after restoration the guest room became colder, because a layer of *teben*, serving as thermal insulator, was removed and replaced with cement. As Shatta – whom I interviewed in March 2005 – puts it:

The ancient civilisation was built out of earth (*teen*) and wood (*khasbb*): it had its roots (*jzour*) in the earth. What's the difference between cement and earth (*trab*)?⁹ There's quite a difference! Earth (*trab*) sends out heat (*daf*) and what sends out heat is called nostalgia (*haneen*) and love (*hob*). Cement sends out cold: it obstructs relations (*'alaqa*) with love and with emotion (*'atif*).

Building materials mediate relations, and even convey emotions such as nostalgia and love. Nostalgia may be expressed as deprivation of an environment and certain domestic materials which one misses: according to many old residents, *lebn*, *teben*, *keneb* and *kels* are expensive materials and the experts in such materials are few and greedy.

Recently many anthropologists have characterised nostalgia as the sentiment that motivates the move back to the places recognised or rebuilt like those of one's own past. Cunningham Bissell (2005) invites us to

study nostalgia as a specifically anthropological subject and a pivotal social phenomenon.¹⁰ According to him, although nostalgia is often treated as a homogeneous, unvarying phenomenon, 'nostalgic discourses ... are anything but singular. In Zanzibar, as elsewhere, they circulate in a social terrain in which diverse forms of memory are at play' (2005, 216). As with other memory practices, nostalgia is a social dynamic that can only be understood within specific historical and spatial contexts; further, nostalgia 'requires an object world to seize on – buildings, fashion, images, and the ephemera of everyday life' (ibid, 221).

For instance, a former resident of the Old City, Khalil, is longing for the stones, the rooms, the walls of the home he sold to a *mustathmar* who restored it to make a hotel. One day Khalil took me to this home-hotel:

I used to live here, I spent my childhood here. In the *qa'a* we used to receive guests. Over there was my grandmother's room. My room was on the first floor as well; when I got married, my room became this one downstairs. This was my father's and mother's bedroom. This home reminds me of my childhood and of family life: in this home lived four families, not just one. We used to stay always together, for food, drinks, in the evening. Life was more attractive in the past.

If a new resident owns the specific monetary capital needed for the orthodox restoration, his nostalgia may result in utopia:

I decided to come back because I love the old city: I was born and grew up here; my family used to live here for a long time. In the past life was simple (*baweta*), with small reason for worrying: one didn't need much money, people were happier. Now there is much money, but people spend much and don't enjoy life (*ma bintmat 'bil-bayat*). In the past you were sure that your family would help you if need be, but now everyone must fend for himself and face up to his responsibility. In the past there was no progress (*badara*); nowadays despite the progress people are not happy, they want more and more.¹¹

New residents own a specific capital of area studies, orientalist readings, historical knowledge. 'Arab home' is for them the seat of history, of building traditions, of the balance between man and nature. According to them, traditional materials are essential ways of improving relations between men and their living environment: as Luna Rajab, chairwoman of the 'Friends of Damascus Association', told me in an interview in April 2005: 'Traditional

materials are natural insulators; ancient houses are built with traditional materials, whereas cement is chemical: living in an ancient home is healthy'. And Ghaned, a film director who in 2005 bought and restored a house in the Qashla Jouaniye neighbourhood of the Old City, whom I interviewed at about the same time, said:

I chose to live in the Old City because it's quieter, far from cars; I love this lifestyle. I love high ceilings; if you live in an Arab home you have a piece of earth and a piece of sky. The Arab home allows you to live in contact with nature and the weather. Since I've lived here I feel cold and heat 100 per cent. I feel nature and sometimes it's hard, but I like it. Since I've lived here I haven't been ill, because my body has got used to weather changes. I've got closer relations with walls, wood, earth.

Well-off Damascenes, nostalgic for the place former generations left behind, may realise their utopia: in many cases, this involves the 'come-back' of descendants of the families that fled (*taraku*) the Old City in the twentieth century; one of them, 'Abu Mohammed, told me that he was attracted by the charm (*ieher*) of the ancient lifestyle. This is the case for Ra'ed Jabry too, owner of a fashionable coffee shop, *Bayt Jabry*, whom I interviewed several times in 2005–06; Ra'ed belongs to the family of Rashad Jabry, the first mayor of Damascus after independence from France, who lived in this courtyard home with his parents and his siblings' households.

The house, built by the Jabry family 300 years ago, was purchased by Ra'ed's grandfather at the beginning of the twentieth century; he paid a considerable sum to the former owner, one of his relatives. When the last inhabitants, three of Ra'ed's aunts, moved to Beirut in the 1970s, the huge building was rented to craftsmen and storemen, who set up their workshops and storehouses there, as often happens in Damascus Old City.

In the mid-1980s almost the entire Jabry family lived outside the city and one wife of young Ra'ed's grandfather was in charge of collecting rents and controlling the condition of the house. Ra'ed, in his thirties, was the only family member, of his generation, still living in Damascus; he decided to repossess the house and to get rid of the tenants. Rescuing the house was expensive; it took a great deal of time and, because of its dilapidated state, the advice of several lawyers and architects:

The craftsmen didn't look after it: they broke floors and walls; there was a paint workshop and they did paint tests on the walls. There

were structural problems: there was a crack in the *iwan* wall from floor to ceiling. There were plenty of wild plants.¹²

Initially, Ra'ed carried out repairs to the drainage and wiring, and rebuilt the floors and the huge fountain in the middle of the courtyard. After that, doors and windows were restored and the walls were cleaned to reveal the stone's natural colours. It took a long time to terminate rent contracts; once this was sorted out, the question arose of the huge number of owners, namely all Ra'ed's grandfather's cousins: 'Many of them lived abroad; I spoke with everyone I could reach and said: "If you have money, come and restore the house, as it's collapsing; otherwise, I'll work it out by myself".'¹³

Then the 35 cousins decided to share the property; but only Ra'ed intended to open and manage a coffee shop there. Part of the shop's earnings are contractually set aside for the restoration of the house; the rest is divided among the cousins, with Ra'ed due the biggest share.

A commitment to the protection of cultural heritage protection is likely to be Ra'ed's main aim. *Bayt Jabry* was the first coffee shop to be opened in an ancient home:

In 1996 a small coffee shop was opened, with 12 chairs, where you could just smoke *narghile* and drink tea and coffee. I used to work as a waiter, but with the passing of time the venue grew, we started to serve traditional cold dishes, and I employed three workers – now there are 65. The first customers were friends: I did no advertising.¹⁴

In the beginning the door was always closed: it wasn't a restaurant, it was a home; there were restaurants and coffee shops in town, but none in an Arab home. When somebody knocked at the door, Ra'ed used to go and see who was there. It was a stirring experience for Damascenes coming here, sitting beside the fountain, smoking *narghile* and enjoying the home environment. Young people growing up in the 1970s and 1980s heard their parents speaking about this area and these homes. The young, seeing for the first time what was hidden in the Old City, cried: 'Oh! In Damascus we have such things.' Many of them thought the decorative masonry was false.¹⁵

Neighbours at first found a such a haunt in this area strange; after five in the evening, indeed, there was no activity in the Old City – *suaq* and shops were closed. Neighbours were opposed to strangers going around the neighborhood: they thought they drank alcohol and had sex there. Then gradually, inviting them for dinner and showing

them the activities in the home, I convinced them it was all good clean fun. I was a bit of a forerunner. Lunatics and brave men are the same.¹⁶

Ra'ed's commitment to the protection of his part of the cultural heritage is visible in the words and images on *Bayt Jabry's* cards. The cards of Old City haunts often have on the back cartographic representations of the area, with information necessary for customers to reach their destination. In the map of the *Bayt Jabry* area, drawn by architect Beshr al-Berry, streets and lanes leading to the restaurant are represented as paths through important places and monuments, such as Maktab 'Anbar (the seat of MMQ), a mosque, Nawfara coffee shop, (*qabwa al-nafwa*), the Umayyad Mosque, the steps behind the latter, Suq Midhat al-Basha, Al-Azem palace (*qar*), al-Hamrawi alley (*zraq*) and Suq al-Bouzuriye. This provides *Bayt Jabry* – at the centre of the map – with a prominent place among such monuments. The designer's reference to tradition and antiquity (in the way places and areas are termed, and in the icon reminiscent of the circular decorations of eighteenth-century Damascene houses) leads the walker a path through the cultural heritage of Damascus.

In the upper part of the card is written a phrase extolling the house's historical value:

Ya'ud bina' badba al-bayt ila 'awa'il al-qarn al-thamin 'ashr wa buwa min al-abniya al-athariyya wa al-marafiq al-tarikhiyya bi-Dmashq.
(‘This house dates back to the beginning of the eighteenth century; it is counted among the archeological monuments and historical goods of Damascus’).

This phrasing, suggested by architect al-Berry, expressly adds the house to the list of historical monuments in Damascus, and – the card ensures that customers are aware of this – states that it is a site of great archeological and cultural value.

It is evident from *Bayt Jabry's* card – although it is that of a restaurant – that the owner is concerned to impart information about the atmosphere of the establishment rather than to list the dishes available there. Here historical and archaeological research has been transposed to a consumerist context: the card seems to suggest that it is worthwhile to visit a historical place, eating in a home which is part of Syrian cultural heritage. We are here expressly facing a case of the commodification of Damascene cultural goods.

Investment of knowledge capital

Knowledge of restoration methods is an economic resource, ‘specific capital’ in Bourdieu's terms. *Mu'allimun* who own such capital guard such knowledge closely – almost obsessively – as the following occurrence shows (though I cannot swear that the story is true rather than apocryphal).

I was told about the episode by Mohammed Nimr Mustapha Abu Shihab, the foreman at *Montlucon's* restoration site; he is an expert in restoring ancient houses with traditional building materials. At Montlucon's home Mohammed showed me a restored wall in the hall to the right of the *ivan*, and asked me proudly: ‘Have you ever seen a wall like this?’ This rhetorical question, anticipating a negative reply, implied knowledge of the secret kept by that wall. This secret lay in the mixture used to build it, called *khabur*, consisting of water, sand, lime, dried tar and ash. He told me that nobody could make a *khabur* like he does. His sand, indeed, is mined 1500 feet underground; it lacks salt and for this reason does not melt like normal sand – which is considered itchy to sleep on, unlike Mohammed's sand. He does not reveal the secrets of his sand to workmates that he would not trust with his life: to keep the secret, he claims it is normal sand. The secret was discovered through a trick: he and his colleague Bilal ‘Abd al-Rasal’ (known as Abu Bilal) entered the site of a house being restored. The master mason, who thought they were foreigners – Algerians or Moroccans, because of their dark-skin and black, bushy, curly hair – invited them to take a seat and some tea. They remained silent as they watched the master mason preparing his *khabur* and talking about the characteristics of the sand with his aides, thinking Mohammed and Bilal could not understand him (Syrian and Maghrebi dialects of Arabic are mutually incomprehensible). Mohammed sat observing, smoking and drinking his tea, and trying to commit the procedure to memory. After some time he stood up and greeted his host in perfect Syrian Arabic. The master mason, astonished, asked him about his origins and his occupation: Mohammed revealed that he was a Syrian mason and slipped away: ‘God gave us slyness, we have to use it!’ This episode highlights the absence of consistency in the communication of knowledge in the field of restoring ancient houses; Syrian universities do not offer courses in restoration, and relevant learning is thus confined to the experiential. Nevertheless, it is actually Mohammed's experience that makes him a point of reference for the architects who direct the restorations.

The lack of specific higher education in the field of restoration is strictly related to the question of nostalgia. As architect Luna Rajab puts it: ‘It's difficult to know how to work traditional material. One must *feel* the material,

one must know *why* it is used. We lack experts knowing how to develop traditional materials, how to help them evolve. We need research.¹⁷

Michel Shatta, an old resident mentioned above, justified his decision to restore his guest room with cement by saying that there was a lack of experts in the restoration of ancient houses. It is indeed not easy to use traditional materials: 'Had I left *trab*, the room would have crumbled. One can no longer do restorations as before, because there is nobody with a good knowledge of the Arab home. The old generation is dead'.¹⁸

Since Syrian university faculties of architecture do not offer postgraduate courses in the restoration of ancient buildings, many Damascene architects working in this sector attend such courses abroad. For instance, Luna Rajab holds a postgraduate qualification in the restoration and maintenance of historical monuments and archaeological sites, earned at the Lebanese University, in collaboration with Chaillot University in France. It would be interesting to investigate the causes of this lacuna in Syrian university provision, all the more surprising in that the country has different sites of historico-cultural interest, among which as many as five are listed in the WHL (the ancient city of Damascus, the ancient city of Bosra, the Palmyra site, the ancient city of Aleppo, Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din), and that reference to architectural traditions seems to be a constant feature in the discourses on the construction of a Syrian national identity in the wider context of the Mediterranean area or the Arab world (see for instance the preface to *Traditional Syrian Architecture* (2004) by Tammam Fakouch, Director-General of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic).

In the absence of adequate professional education in Syria, the transmission of restoration knowledge is through oral tradition passed on from generation to generation. Mohammed Nimr Mustapha was groomed for the restoration of ancient houses by Dawd 'Abu Shar, a Christian from Ma'loula, in 1991. At the time 'Abu Shar was restoring a convent in Damascus. As he said to Mohammed: 'I'm not a master: somebody that knows more than me could come and teach me',¹⁹ so whenever he sees a restoration site, he always takes the opportunity to look it over, 'because there's always something to learn'.²⁰

The lack of a specific higher education need not embarrass Damascene architects: knowledge acquisition through experience may reflect well on them. According to architect Zabiya (who nonetheless attended a post-graduate course in ancient-building restoration in Italy): 'One must enhance one's *savoir-faire*. I learned it all more by doing than by studying at the university. My workers have learned over time to be more and more precise, and now they have their own *savoir-faire*'.²¹

Mu'allimun who own this knowledge capital can bring pressure on investors and on new residents; as specific capital, knowledge of traditional

restoration techniques can place them in an ideal position to bargain with employers. Working hard, an expert *mu'allim's* wages can reach S£ (Syrian pounds) 35,000 (£470 sterling) monthly, well over the salary of a medium-level civil servant (who earns perhaps S£9,600). *Mu'allimun* bargain over their workers' wages with the employers; non-specialised masons earn some S£500 per diem, though usually *mu'allimun* specialising in restoration obtain higher wages for their workers. They are charged with dividing the wages among the workers on Thursday, the last working day of the week. Such *mu'allimun* can afford to choose whether to accept or to reject a job: if Mohammed does not like the architect in charge of the restoration, for instance, he refuses to work with him, even if he fills the fountain with money for me!²²

Apart from the benefits that can derive from direct bargaining with employers, *mu'allimun* often resort to other expedients to supplement their own salaries. As he is unique in knowing how to find raw materials to amalgamate *khabur* and to use other traditional materials, the *mu'allim* often puts in higher estimates than what he expects to spend. For example, sufficient hay to face the walls of two rooms costs S£500–600: Mohammed often puts in a double estimate: 'So, if there is any trouble during the work, everything is all right'.²³ Sometimes he resorts to similar expedients to buy a new column or 'pillow'.

In this way workers obtain ownership of traditional materials: this often amounts to a re-appropriation of the means of production, over which they normally have no control. As Mohammed puts it: 'My sons know how to read and write; I don't: I prefer to write with my own material, lime [*lels*]. Lime and *lehn* course through my veins. I talk with the walls, and they tell me how to proceed with my work'.

The product itself, a restored house, is out of workers' reach: 'If you consider that it takes at least 12 logs to build a wall, and each one costs S£1000, it takes S£12,000 for a wall. A new house is cheaper: a hammer costs S£10, and the wall is less thick'.²⁴

Architects also establish a particular relation with the materials used. According to architect Na'im Zabiya, the restoration of a Damascene house requires the constant presence of the architect on site:

You must see, touch the stone to sort out what the house needs. For instance, we have a 35-inch wall and we have to build a window: how do we manage? To get such things one has to stay at the scene: you can't draw a project and give it to the workers, as with new buildings. When you work at restoration inside a house, you feel what a house wants, what it tells you. It's the house that decides. You find surprises at any time, unexpected things – so you have to change your mind

and revise the project. I love working on ancient houses, because one understands how the architects used to think in the past.²⁵

The architect in charge of the restoration, like the workers, does not usually own the finished product. When I asked Zabiya why he didn't live in a Damascene home, which he loves so much, he answered by shaking his head and saying he would like to, but it was too expensive.

There is a general awareness that the production process has to take a long time: the longer the time spent in restoration, the better the outcome. According to one *mustathmar* (a female *mustathmar*) whom I interviewed in 2005: 'If the landlord wants a hasty job, he gets by but the outcome is not good'. Usually on a restoration site workers say: 'The work will be finished in two months', but this is a way of indicating that no realistic estimate can be made at this stage: it is well known that a Damascene house requires patience and a lengthy period of time. According to Na'im Zabiya:

Many landlords think that a restoration is a matter of rapid manual work. But it requires time, it requires the expert to spend hours watching and touching materials, guessing why a wall is made in a certain way, studying the reasons for a certain technique, and acting according to what he has understood.²⁶

Production and working patterns

As I have stressed above, cultural goods are fruits of specific production and working patterns, in which the different actors use strategies to enhance their specific capital and to improve their position in the production hierarchies.

Although it seems trite to stress it, the gentrification (*islah*) of Damascus Old City is made possible by the working patterns on restoration sites.

The concept Damascenes draw on to describe ongoing changes in the Old City is *islah*, ('gentrification'), interpreted as architectonic and social improvement of the area. Many Damascenes believe that a space possesses its own qualities (*salabiye*); these qualities can get lost, in which case they have to be recovered – but what seems to be this retrieval of lost qualities is actually the production of new qualities and values, grounded in groups' imaginative construction of the space.

Encounters between different groups with active roles in *islah*, with different forms of imaginative constructs, different reference points as to values and qualities, give rise to compromises, controversies and adaptations; we need to observe the processes through which qualities and values

are socially constructed, to look for the ways in which such qualities become as it were embedded in the space, and how the space itself, through restoration, increases in value.

The general working pattern in the restoration of an Arab home is the following: a *mustathmar* purchases a house from the former owners, who cannot afford to spend capital (or see no point in doing so) for the maintenance of the building; they therefore seek to sell it, since also the price of buildings in the Old City is rising.²⁷ The *mustathmar* may intend to use the house for living in or as a commercial venue (coffee shop, restaurant, hotel). He brings in an architect – an expert in the restoration of ancient buildings – who produces a plan for the proposed restoration. The architect expounds his project to the MMQ, which measures its adequacy against the two corollaries mentioned above; if the MMQ's advice is favourable, the *mustathmar* pays a tax for the restoration. The architect then asks a *mu'allim* (master mason) to form a team of carpenters; the *mu'allim* brings his acquaintances in, often young men living in his district and, in the case of immigrants from other parts of Syria, from the same background. Once restoration has begun, the carpenters and the *mu'allim* work on the site for eight hours every day. Among the *mu'allim*'s tasks is opening the site in the morning – he therefore holds a key to the entrance door. Sometimes the architect stays away from the site to deal with the *mustathmar* and the MMQ; the latter sends an agent every two or three days to check if the work being done is in accordance with the plan previously agreed.

MMQ inspectors have open access to restoration sites, where those in charge and the workers treat them in a familiar manner. Inspectors whom I followed could go round sites without arousing resentment: they were not seen as nit-picking supervisors who would stop the work if restoration norms were not followed. Indeed, at some sites it seemed to me that I was myself suspected by the workers of being an informer for some institution (though this mainly happened in the early stages of the fieldwork, when the director of the restoration still had not found the time to introduce me to the team).

Very often at restoration sites MMQ inspectors become part of the workers' network of friendly and familiar relations, though they are usually architects who stand out by their way of dressing, speaking and behaving. Architect al-Berry, for instance, always has a thin propelling pencil in his breast pocket, and inspects restoration directors' drawings and designs, sometimes helping them to design small details. Architect Na'im Zabiya dresses informally, and often jots down his notes on a palmtop, which he also uses to take photographs. Workers address them as *ustadh* ('professor'), a term widely used to address a graduate, acknowledging his or her authority in specific contexts.

The architect and the *mu'allim* play key roles in this situation. If the *mustathmar* is a foreigner, the Syrian architect – who usually speaks at least one language besides Arabic – is the only one who can mediate between his (the *mustathmar*'s) requirements and the workers. Usually the *mustathmar* does not deal with the *mu'allim* and the carpenters, delegating this to the architect, to whom he allocates the money needed for the restorations. He then deducts his own fee, pays the *mu'allim* and gives him the amount needed to buy building materials and to pay the workers.

The workers weave solidarity networks, based on various factors but chiefly on common geographical origins, and consequently (following the general settlement pattern in many Middle Eastern cities) on common residence in a certain district of Damascus. Sometimes the architect has his own team; more often the director of the restoration gets the *mu'allim* to pick a team from among his acquaintances, and very often from his own district. For instance, the workers restoring the former house of Khalil (mentioned above) are from the suburb of Tell. Architect Zabiya's workers are almost all of Palestinian origin, interrelated and from a Shiite town in Syria. Montlucon's workers are from Golan, live in Berzeh district and have long known each other. Both *mu'allimin*, Mohammed Nimr Mustapha Abu Shihaband and Bilal 'Abd al-Rasal 'Abu Bilal, were asked by architect Ricca to pick a team, in acknowledgement of their specific capital: their relations with other workers. Mohammed and Bilal have together restored several houses since 1992, and architect Zabiya has entrusted them with many tasks. The two *mu'allimin* are bound by fraternal fellowship – as they put it: 'Me and Mohammed are one thing; one and one makes one. It takes few acts and words for us to understand each other. When I'm under the ceiling and he's on the floor we look each other in the eye and immediately we know what to do.'²⁸

In the team restoring Montlucon's house a playful hierarchic distinction is in force according to skin colour: the pretence is that humbler tasks devolve on 'blacks' rather than 'whites'. Making tea, on a portable gas cooker, is a task for the workers, who serve it to *asatidh* (plural of *ustadh*) and visitors (Figure 7). Very often directors and MMQ supervisors know each other – sometimes MMQ employees themselves direct restorations, in which case supervisors are their colleagues or their assistants. Officially, MMQ architects cannot direct private restorations, yet this rule is sometimes ignored.

When the director of restoration is not an MMQ employee, behaving familiarly towards supervisors is a means of warding off their opposition to restorations which violate MMQ norms. (Making a Damascene house habitable, according to a new resident's standards, entails building work that cannot accord with these norms.)²⁹



Figure 7. Tea break at the Bayt Montlucon restoration site.

On my trip to Damascus in June 2004 my landlord was not in town, but I was able to see the room where he stayed during his visits to the city. There was a mattress resting on the roof, a small closet fitted into a recess in the wall, with a few clothes and books. This room was part of a mezzanine cutting the hall on the left of the *iwan*.

In other restoration sites, the restorers construct small bathrooms and kitchens. As I have stressed above, architectonic operations that alter the frames of the buildings are forbidden in the Old City, but MMQ supervisors allow such operations as running plumbing and pipework through the walls or installing bathroom and kitchen fittings, provided they do not damage the building. However, architects cannot avoid transforming the space if the home is to be made habitable.

According to Maria Kaika (2005), the transformation of raw materials (water, gas, etc.) into goods necessary to make the house habitable is one of the techniques through which modern individuality is built. Improvements carried out in the Old City's buildings during the twentieth century provided old residents with direct access to resources such as electricity,

drinking water, and water for other uses – brought to Damascus from different springs, and inside the home led to different taps; such work is the dowry of modernity, shared among Syrian cities during the decades of Ba'ath party government. This dowry – the concealment of cables and pipes underground or inside the walls that carry controlled and urbanized nature inside the home – are essential to new residents building their houses, and in particular show that they adhere to the development of cultural heritage – which paradoxically entails rejecting old residents' earlier improvements. Where these are visible (such as plaster and enamel on the walls) new residents remove them, but leave the invisible ones (the infrastructures allowing the transformation of water and gas) beneath the surface, in order to make possible the so-called 'contact with nature' (earth, wood, the trees in the courtyard, the water of the fountain).

It is possible that the functions of the rooms may change totally, for instance when a new owner installs plumbing and gas piping for a kitchen or bathroom. Basements (*qaba*) are normally used as larders by old inhabitants, as they remain cool throughout the year; Montluçon's basement, however, will be the main kitchen. In June 2004 a plumber had installed marble sinks, and was trying to find a solution to the seepage of sewage from near drains, as the *qaba* is under the street surface. The space on the west side of the *qa'a* had originally been a *hammam*, but the former dwellers had stopped using it; here a small sauna will be attached. A dome with holes drilled to let the light in through coloured glass has been fitted on the ceiling, as in a public *hammam*. Thus a venue which in Middle Eastern cities is designed for public encounters of men and, on specific days, of women – by definition a place outside the home – may become, through restoration, a private domestic place.

This shows that authenticity and tradition are negotiable concepts, emerging from strategies which social actors carry out to validate or contest norms and discourses of institutional actors acknowledged as authorities on cultural heritage. New residents, the stakeholders in the Old City's development, negotiate with MMQ, the main such authority, over the criteria and techniques suitable for combining authenticity – a quality embedded in materials and building structures – with habitability.

Commodification

A house restored following 'traditional' criteria (even if there is dispute about which authority is handing down the knowledge of such criteria), using 'authentic' materials and made habitable, is where the objectification of tradition, history and dwelling culture takes place: it becomes an

'Arab home'. As in other sites where cultural heritage is being developed, in Damascus the development field is occupied mainly by private persons (new residents and entrepreneurs), favoured (since the 1980s) by economic liberalisation and (in 2004) by the abolition of state control of investment in private tourism. They enter the development market with their own specific capital, made up of money and political support, and help to raise the exchange value of the built environment (to the detriment of other social actors' values). Even the institutions in charge of protecting cultural heritage acknowledge these private actors as partners in the conservation and development of local resources, and 'the seemingly "impassable divide" between growth and conservation is imagined to be bridged by market-oriented sustainable development' (West, 2005, 635). Indeed, in the conceptual framework to which such institutions subscribe, the built environment is a capital to be developed; the same framework informs Unesco's practices. As Collart, Abdul-Hak and Dillon, commissioned by Unesco and by the Syrian Ministry of National Education to carry out a survey on Damascene and Syrian monuments in 1954, stressed in their report, these monuments are a capital whose value may change with the passage of time, and this must be taken into account in their *mise en valeur*. The monuments may indeed 'foster profitable economic activities', yet they are 'almost completely unexploited' (Collart et al, 1954, 12). The latest Unesco report (Pini et al, 2008) stressed that the historic fabric of the Old City is attractive for tourists and visitors and is capable of offering expenditure and income possibilities for Syrians.

In 2005 the first hotel in the *madina al-qadima* was opened; directly targeting international clients, it is named *Bayt al-Mamlouka* ('Mameluke's home') after a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century arch discovered in the building, in which there are many similar historical associations. Maya, manager of the hotel and an art historian, whom I interviewed in 2005, said she 'chose' the Mameluke period and sought out historical associations of the same era; she chose certain spatial elements and emphasised them: doors ('I did research on the Damascene doors in the sixteenth century'³⁰) and windows; other elements are reminders of the past: a nineteenth-century tailor's table, an old chair (Figure 8).

Local architectural history is thus objectified: the Mameluke period becomes recognisable in a building or in certain objects. Reified, it can be 'chosen', touched, make to emerge from the past like an archaeological find. As Berardino Palumbo stresses, the world of heritage is 'objectified', shaped by 'cultural things', items produced by history and kept, salvaged and exploited by our nostalgic and 'fetishist' contemporary world (2006, 58).

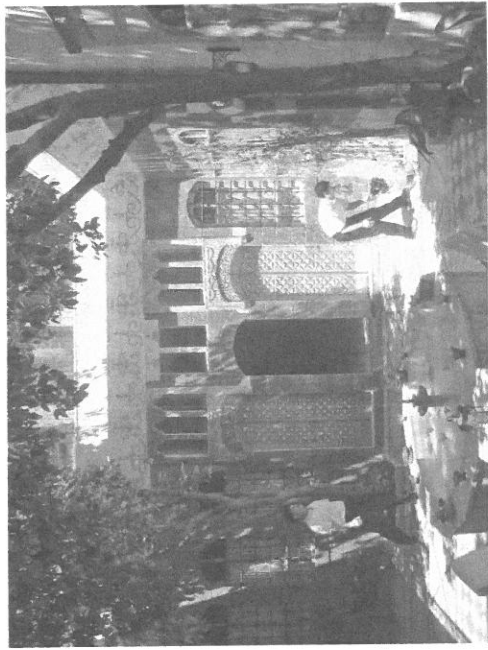


Figure 8. Waiters at *Bayt al-Mamlouka*.

The very phrase 'Arab home' seems the objectification of a vanished social world which developers seek to revitalise, the reification of the 'ancient civilisation' with which *mustathmarin* want to set up a new link. They summarise in the term 'Arab home' their ideas and representations of that social world.

In the hotels and coffee shops of the Old City, 'ancient civilisation' can be bought and tasted. As Maya puts it: 'Foreigners look for an idea (*fikra*) of an Arab home; why wouldn't they be allowed to taste (*istadbuq*) an Arab home?' Khalil himself, the informant I have several times mentioned, underlines the reasons why staying in a hotel in the Old City is so charming: 'Ancient homes are rich in culture (*ghaniye al-thaqafa*): people love to come in, to observe, to touch. After staying here, one seeks (*bitlub*, literally 'orders') this way of living (*q'ada*).'³¹

Thus tradition – objectified in the materials and forms of the Arab homes – is commodified: this is what happens when entrepreneurs enter the cultural heritage development business. Like food in a restaurant, 'traditional' structures can be 'tasted'; the 'way of living' can be 'ordered' as in a coffee shop. Culture (*thaqafa*), once reified, can be sought out, observed, touched, like an object; commodified, it can be found and purchased.

At this point the 'Arab home' commodity is ready to move up in the property market.³² *Mustathmarin* show the old residents what their buildings are worth, in a market hungry for their properties. The rise in Old City land values,³³ the high cost of materials, the greed of experts and the high

levels of restoration tax lead many residents of the Old City to dispose of their houses and move into apartments in the new city. The decline of the extended family as a living unit³⁴ makes it impossible for old residents to look after such huge spaces in the absence of their sons' families. As Moafaq Dughman, former director of MMQ, explained to me in an interview in 2004, 'When the father dies and many children remain, problems arise and living together (*itirfaq*) becomes impossible'.

Among the causes of the decline of the extended family are the emigration of younger people from Damascus to other *muhafaza*,³⁵ or to Gulf countries (Fargues, 2006), Europe, North America and North Africa (UN Statistical Commission & Eurostat, 2001), and changes in new couples' residential choices, living with mothers rather than fathers. Many old residents thus perceive their properties as useless, or even a drain on their finances, while aware that their area attracts *mustathmarin* and that land values are rising. The best option for them, therefore, is to sell their homes to well-off people. Also, the price of a house rises when the seller knows the buyer has a plan to attract tourists.

For instance, there has recently been an exodus of old residents from the Qashla district to Abbaseen,³⁶ outside the Old City, and from the Bab Touma district towards the neighbouring outer district of Qassa.³⁷ Khalil (already mentioned above) moved from Bab Touma to Qassa, yet he remains thoroughly familiar with Bab Touma's geography, and sees his former neighbours every day; he still thinks of it as his own neighborhood. Old Mr and Mrs Serji, former owners of the huge house which is now the *Bayt al-Mamlouka* hotel, in Bab Touma, have moved to an apartment in Qassa. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Serji family, whose name many Bab Touma inhabitants know, lived in their home; when they sold it, the rising Serji generation had already moved: married children had left the Old City for other Damascus districts with their nuclear families, so the elderly parents decided to sell their property.

The possibility cannot be ruled out that old residents may make capital out of the rising interest in the Old City: many of them, indeed, turn into semi-professionals in the hotel business and rent out rooms. For instance, Mr and Mrs Selloun, with whom I stayed for a considerable period of time, were offered a large sum of money for their house by a bidder who wanted to convert it into a coffee shop. Their only son lives in Guadeloupe and his remittances contribute to his parents' means of support, yet over the past few years their main source of income has been renting out the first-floor rooms to foreigners – mostly students attending Arabic courses at Damascus University or in language institutes. This income allowed them to turn down the offer and to stay in their home. It is generally admitted

that selling one's house is not for far-sighted persons – as the saying goes: 'The one who sells his home gets rich for one year, the one who buys a house gets poor for one year' (*illi bibi'u baythum bighanna sini wa illi bištari bayt bišqar sini*).

Nevertheless, cultural amenities and the tourist sector in the Old City are tightly controlled by the *mustathmarin*: they are the main actors in the objectification of history, building traditions and identity, and the main stakeholders in the commodification of the products that incorporate such objectifications. The process of producing restored 'Arab homes' assigns these objects a surplus value that turns them into commodities in the property market and in the tourist sector. Restored houses are full of mysterious, floating qualities: culture, tradition, history, nature, mankind's genius – an impression reinforced by the quotation reported above from the 1953 Unesco survey.

New potential residents think that these qualities are what lend the spatial objects a higher value. They fail to realise that what enhances the value of restored houses is actually a process, involving physical and mental energy, time, imagination and specific capital. This process is one of social labour. The mystery surrounding a spatial object – which seems lifeless, but is a social product – makes it more attractive and raises its exchange value. According to Lefebvre:

In the sensorial-sensual space (practical-sensible) one can't see the very social relations, the relations of production. They are bypassed ... Such sensorial-sensual space introduces itself inside the visible-readable, underestimating the issues that actually dominate the social practice (i.e. the labour, the division of labour, the organization of labour). The sensorial-sensual space ... contains social relations (1978, 211).

Marxist analysis, applied by Lefebvre to the space at large, casts light, in the case of cultural-heritage development, on the question of the higher, mysterious and fluid qualities attaching to the built environment in ancient districts. New and potential residents feel attracted to the old buildings, especially if the latter are rare, if they keep historical associations alive, and if at the same time they are fully habitable and have all modern conveniences installed. These people fail to discern the reasons for this attraction, which lies in the very mystery of the object: it is attractive because of its qualities (rarity, historical association, inhabitability, and the like). They realise that there must be a force out of which such qualities were created; but they hold that this force is 'tradition' (*al-taqlid*), 'history' (*al-tarikh*), 'costume' (*al-'adat*), 'origin' (*al-'asl*) or 'roots' (*al-jawr*), rather than what

it is – social labour. Interpreted from this perspective, discourses on antiquity, tradition, authenticity and cultural heritage come across as ideologies that, embedded in a space, prescribe the location of certain activities, establish 'social standing' (fashionable or ill-famed districts, districts to invest in and districts to leave) and explain the reasons for this state of affairs.

As Berardino Palumbo puts it, "'identities", "cultures", "traditions", "localities", "authenticity", "typicalness" are essentialized and essentializing products of globalization' (2006, 60) and they are caught inside mechanisms of objectification and of claim, of ideological and reflexive statement that, framed in the relations between powers, institutions and the actors of different political scenes, shape their status and very often transform them into commodities, properties exploited inside the market of differences.

Once we go into all the details of such ideologies from a Marxist perspective, we realise that what shapes the social space are productive forces, working patterns and social relations. Traces of such forces are removed from the spatial objects, as are those of workers; ideologies that mask productive forces remain (Lefebvre, 1978, 210–12). Removing the traces of manufacturing processes on the one hand facilitates divorcing the product from the worker, and on the other hand makes the spatial object a commodity whose higher qualities people acknowledge. The more long and careful the development and restoration work, the more the value of the commodity rises on the property market. Thus the entity called an 'Arab home', produced by the objectification of a social world constructed out of antiquity, authenticity, rarity, historicity and typicalness, acquires another value – an exchange value – with which it is equipped for circulation in the cultural-heritage market.

Exclusions and threats

The development of cultural heritage brings about both threats and exclusions. Indeed, rises in the value of land and buildings leads, on the one hand, to increases in rents: many tenants, up until recently protected by their agreement with owners for the setting of a fair rent,³⁸ move from their homes. On the other hand, some owners, not commanding the capital needed for restoration, sell their houses to builders. Indeed, the price of restoration materials, the cost of employing experts in restoration techniques and the standard official procedures for carrying out restorations have deterred many old residents from restoring their houses. Since the 1980s, after Unesco's endorsement, Damascus regional council ruled that the Old City's built environment must be protected; as a consequence, residents were restrained from modernising, changing or extending their houses in the wake of the Damascus property boom and accompanying demographic increase.

Demolitions, extensions, the dividing-up of rooms by the erection of interior walls, were forbidden or made hugely complex under the procedures brought in by the institutions in charge of protecting cultural heritage. From then on any restoration or change, even of minor importance, had to be carried out using expensive 'traditional' or 'original' materials; and structural changes were simply forbidden. For many old residents the solution was to get rid of their properties, often at a very low price, and to move to other urban areas, chiefly into modern apartments; others stayed in the Old City, carrying out 'secondary adjustments'³⁹ that allowed them to keep on living *in situ*, tailoring their lifestyle to the changes in the 'image' of the district and in the socio-cultural context introduced by new residents and *mustahmarin*.

Carpenters and architects, though working on the restoration, do not own the product of their labour, namely the developed space launched onto the market; and former owners of cultural goods are excluded from their development. Damascenes of rural origins living in undeveloped neighbourhoods of the Old City, Palestinian refugees and other groups that had adapted houses to their needs were treated as threats to the development of cultural heritage. In the 1953 Unesco survey these groups were picked out as responsible for the deterioration of ancient districts: buildings were indeed being used for purposes other than those the builders had envisaged, and were badly altered and converted (Collart et al, 1954, 9). Collart and his colleagues deplored the fact that buildings were left totally without maintenance, because owners were 'too poor to cover needed expenses' (ibid, 10). These groups – 'the poor and refugees' (ibid, 11) – were responsible for erecting 'unsalubrious and parasitical buildings' and for turning monuments into dwellings: the real 'diseases of an old city' (ibid, 18).

According to the Unesco survey, the protection of cultural heritage involves keeping the picturesque quality of ancient areas, their beauty and their tourist appeal (ibid, 20). Preserving residents' needs was not among the aims; on the contrary, 'the poor', 'refugees', immigrants from the countryside living in ancient districts hindered the protection of monuments. Even in *mustahmarin* discourses, the groups that moved from the countryside to Damascus at the beginning of the twentieth century are picked out as mainly responsible for the deterioration of the Old City that drove well-off families to move to other urban areas. The latest Unesco report (Pini et al, 2008), although recognizing the importance of implementing the network of canalization (sewage, water supply and drainage), of renovating the electrical network and of repaving the streets, highlighted the deterioration of built environment and the overall lack of maintenance. The authors stressed that the poor resident population is responsible for such 'pathologies' (ibid, 14).

Old residents' house conversions seriously concern the MMQ. Architect al-Berry one day led me on a walk over the roofs of a *sug*, showing me what he called the 'sprawling building'; he chiefly blamed the new rooms that old residents had built on the roofs. Such habits, according to al-Berry, show the insensitivity of the local population to the protection of cultural heritage, and contribute to the deterioration of the Old City. The practice of building closets, potting sheds and other rooms on roofs is widespread among old residents. They also store tools for maintaining the roof itself – paint rollers, sacks of lime and sometimes cement (a building material forbidden in the Old City) – since the roof has to be waterproofed periodically to avoid rain seepage damaging the frame of the house, which is made (as noted earlier) mostly of wooden beams and mud hammers (*lehn*). As many architects from the MMQ stress, 'the Old City is growing upwards'. Although widespread, such practices are illegal and punishable, according to the 1978 corollaries.

This is one of the reasons why the MMQ is perceived by old residents as an alien body; the norms it imposes are matters of general concern for old residents, who remain wary of MMQ employees. Not long ago an attempt was made to conduct a census of the Old City's population and buildings; an MMQ team was sent to collect information on family members, their incomes, their level of education, their housing conditions and the layout of their houses. The work remained uncompleted, due to the difficulty the team found in winning the trust and cooperation of residents; the latter were suspicious, and found the inquiry an undue intrusion into their living space.

Further, the alienation of old residents from cultural-heritage development is one ideological means which new residents exploit to justify their 'come-back' to the Old City: many stress the contrast between themselves and their social environment, and some consider purchasing a house in the Old City as in a sense reconquering a space taken away from the legal owner by people 'from outside'. According to Porter (2003), the authorities in charge of protecting the Old City of Fez identify people from rural areas as responsible for the destruction of cultural heritage, and in doing so they are acting in accordance with the stereotypical setting of city (civilisation) against countryside (backwardness). Through protection projects such stereotypes can be institutionalised in an official, authoritarian and state-driven version of the past; thus development of cultural heritage becomes an ideological tool to discriminate between *Fassi* (Fez citizens) and new incomers. (Michael Herzfeld (1991) has studied similar dynamics in Crete.)

The terms MMQ officers use, dealing with the current changes in the Old City, show their adherence to the *mustahmarin* perspective: in their idiom, districts under protection and development are presented as areas of distinction, places with lofty qualities related chiefly to the past. The sense

of nostalgia for past qualities and values is nourished through various strategies, and remains in the concept of *islah*, or gentrification. The verb *sallaba* means 'to improve', implying 'playing an active part in implementing something or somebody's qualities'. The concept of *islah*, derived from the same root, implies an action carried out to raise the qualities of an object or an individual, to enhance or dignify.⁴⁰

Besides *islah*, the terms MMQ officers use dealing with cultural heritage development are 'awakening' (*sabua*), 'awareness' (*uati*), and chiefly 'the come-back to the Old City' (*vujut li-l-madina al-qadima*). The last of these refers back to its opposite, the 'way out' that occurred from the period of the French Mandate (1920–46) until the 1980s, when the wealthiest groups of Damascenes fled the Old City for more prestigious urban areas; the expansion of the districts of Mezza, 'Abu Rumaneh and Malki was mainly due to these new arrivals. The owners of buildings in the Old City rented them out cheaply to rural immigrants; large Arab houses, previously the home of a single extended family, were divided into flats for a number of families, with new structures then being added in the available spaces (courtyards, roofs). Many immigrants and Palestinian refugees still dwell in these houses.

Increases in land values cause rents to rise,⁴¹ forcing old tenants to move from the Old City. While new residents and *mustatbmarin* 'come back', old tenants and former owners move out. With respect to the 'come-back', the public authorities ignore this outbound flow, underrating the presence of people who have been living in these districts for many years and failing to notice that the 'awakening' and the 'come-back' produce an opposite effect: an exodus from the Old City. With respect to the 'awakening' (of interest in the Old City) the authorities suppose that previously the rule was neglect, as if people there were uninterested in living in a satisfying urban space and were instead the main reason for the deterioration of the built environment. The MMQ identifies *mustatbmarin* and new residents as stakeholders in the Unesco-supported development of the Old City, as do the authors of the latest Unesco report, welcoming the relevant increase of restaurants and hotels as an important opportunity to ensure the economic vitality of the Ancient City and to provide the financial resources that are necessary to preserve the architectural heritage (Pini et al, 2008, 25). As Paige West stresses, when the free market is entrusted with the task of protecting cultural heritage, institutions acknowledge as main actors those stakeholders willing to turn protected sites into financial resources; people already living in these sites come to be seen as a threat to the cultural heritage and to the site itself (2005, 635).

Conclusion

The Damascus regional council's decisions after the Unesco mandate on cultural-heritage protection have two objective corollaries: the safeguarding of the structures and the employment of traditional materials. Such decisions and their corollaries give rise to a further set of (subjective) corollaries, or 'secondary adjustments', through which social actors involved in cultural-heritage development arrange to act and operate in their own environment, and at the same time to develop their own concepts and representations relating to the qualities of that environment. In this way an arena of action and debate emerges, in which the spatial object becomes a product and a producer of social values, which have to be understood from cultural, symbolic and economic perspectives.

A remarkable investment of social actors' imaginative and symbolic capital has turned the Old City of Damascus into a desirable and valuable *arrière-pays*. Such imaginative investment is carved into the shape of an 'Arab home' – the centre of the 'elsewhere' that the middle classes desire and restoration workers build. An 'Arab home' is an object built of wood and stone, but also with values embedded in it. When the exchange value outweighs other values, real-estate entrepreneurs become the main actors in cultural-heritage development; their role as cultural-heritage curators and as developers, beside their being economic actors, is more or less openly acknowledged by the institutions in charge of cultural-heritage protection.

Turned into commodities – and handled by social actors who recognise Unesco values in themselves and who are acknowledged by institutions as the stakeholders of cultural-heritage development – buildings, monuments and the whole site gain in universally measurable exchange value. As a consequence, the 'universal value' mentioned in the 1954 Unesco report assumes concrete, measurable features. A space (a home, a neighborhood, an urban district) becomes an exchange value, and the developed spatial products become commodities to exchange in property and tourist markets.

Cultural-heritage development drives land and building values up; rents rise, no longer kept down by state edict. A fair proportion of the resident population, lacking the wherewithal to restore and develop their cultural goods, are seen by protection institutions as a threat, and forced to flee the Old City for other urban districts. Forms of social unease appear among these displaced people, deprived of their familiar environment and set down in areas where they cannot rely on the neighbours, local solidarity and extended-family links which previously shaped their existence.

Notes

* This chapter focuses on the city of Damascus describing actors and agents involved in the conservation of its urban heritage before the beginning of the conflict there in early 2011. Although the social and material conditions of the Syrian people have changed dramatically, the author intends to leave a historical testimony of the recent past of the country.

1. I had a conversation on these issues with Ulf Hannerz during the seminar on *The Geocultural Imagination: Scenarios and Storylines*, at the University of Milan-Bicocca, 2007.
2. Urban designer Michel Ecochard, in the first urban plan, designed-in demolition and street-widening, but soon the mandatory authorities decided to safeguard ancient districts from major modernisation. The new mandatory tendency was to preserve ancient districts as relics of the local past: an irrational, traditionalist, exotic and sensuous past, according to Ecochard's orientalist reading, in sharp contrast to the modern, progressive, rational and well-ordered new urban forms, according to theories Ecochard had studied at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris (Mazieres, 1985).
3. As Geoff Porter (2003) underlines in his sketch of the European cultural-heritage movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the first phase monuments were transformed to be symbols; in the second phase, architectural forms and the built environment were preserved together, including customs, habits and local activities, all invested with symbolic significance.
4. According to Bourdieu (2003), people's practices, acts, thoughts, perceptions, expressions and utterances are regulated improvisations produced by *habitus*; they are limited by the material, historical and social conditions under which they were produced. Practices generated by *habitus* reproduce such objective conditions.
5. 'Their influence crosses borders ... their protection is of interest to all civilized nations ... These monuments are part of humanity's cultural treasure' (Collart et al, 1954, 34).
6. On the post-colonial implications of such an approach to cultural heritage, see Maffi, 2006.
7. It even happens that people restoring listed buildings use materials from ruined homes in other ancient districts.
8. Corm, 1997; 2005; Kapeliouk, 1999; Gresh, 2000a; 2000b; 2005a; 2005b; Chesnot, 1993; Aronson, 2000; de la Gorce, 2001; 2004; Cahen, 2002; Laurens, 2002; George, 2003; Aita, 2005.
9. Many Damascenes with a partial knowledge of the techniques of restoration refer to traditional building materials in general as *trab* ('earth', 'ash') or *teen* ('earth', 'mud'). Looking at a wall with a surface crack, where one can see the different layers out of which it is made, the unskilled eye sees merely earth and mud. Yet this is not an intentional undervaluation of these materials: on the contrary, the value of earth and wood is well recognised, as is shown in

the saying 'Take the earth, it becomes gold' (*kemash al-trab yaqlab dhahab*), and in the custom of considering wood a lucky material: as the saying goes, 'beat the wood' (*duq'ala al-khashb*) to drive envy and bad luck away. However, I stress that a Damascene home is not built simply out of earth and wood. I enjoyed the privilege, which is not granted to all Damascenes, of observing the work of *mo'allimoon* in restoration sites, and of being introduced to the 'specific capital' of techniques often ignored by the residents themselves. The very orientalist stereotype of the ancient Arab home made of 'mud and wood' (Keenan, 2000) fails to take account of the richness of such capital. A spatial object as the seat of objectified and embedded sociality is a classic anthropological issue; the study of sociality embedded in architectonic objects, media and producers of meaning has been recently applied to the Middle East by, among others, Nadia Abu el-Haj (2001).

11. Informant: Abu Mohammed, interview with the author, Damascus 2004. Recently Abu Mohammed bought back the home, in the ancient district of al-'Islah, which his grandparents had sold at the beginning of the twentieth century.
12. Informant: Ra'ed Jabry, interview with the author, Damascus 2005.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid 2004.
15. Informant: architect Beshr al-Berry, interview with the author, Damascus 2004.
16. Informant: Ra'ed Jabry, interview with the author, Damascus 2004.
17. Informant: architect Luna Rajab, interview with the author, Damascus 2005.
18. Informant: Michel Shatta, interview with the author, Damascus 2004.
19. Informant: Mohammed Nimr Mustapha, interview with the author, Damascus 2004.
20. Ibid.
21. Informant: architect Na'im Zabiya, interview with the author, Damascus 2006.
22. Informant: Mohammed Nimr Mustapha, interview with the author, Damascus 2004.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Informant: architect Na'im Zabiya, interview with the author, Damascus 2005.
26. Ibid.
27. As an alternative, an owner can regain possession of his building by evicting tenants.
28. Informant: Bilal 'Abd al-Rasal, interview with the author, Damascus 2004.
29. Michel de Certeau (1990) suggests analysing urban life by starting from people's everyday tactics in replying to the strategies of administrators and city planners. Urban systems should have managed or suppressed such tactics, yet they live on through the deterioration of urban systems; such practices, far from being controlled or cancelled out by the panoptical administration, are strengthened by illegitimacy and by slipping through the cracks in surveillance networks; these

tactics themselves become systems of everyday regulation, forms of creativity concealed by operations and discourses of conservative organisation.

30. Informant: Mrs Maya, manager and owner of the hotel, interview with the author, Damascus 2005.
31. Informant: Mr Khalil, interview with the author, Damascus 2005.
32. For a discussion of the space as an economic resource, see Lefebvre, 1978; Signorelli, 1996; Smith, 1982; 1987; Clark, 1988.
33. Smith (1987) and Clark (1988) explain why areas chosen for rehabilitation are located in inner cities. They draw on rent-gap theory, i.e. the difference between actual and potential land values. Estate value is equal to the building value plus the actual land value. The latter is seldom equivalent to potential land value: this happens only when the land is used with maximum economic efficiency, in which case there is no rent gap. Building depreciation involves a fall in actual land value: in this case the rent gap widens to such an extent that the building's owner no longer invests capital in its maintenance – as it is evidently not worth while – and makes little profit from it. The deterioration of the building then worsens. As the rent gap widens, investors' interest in estate rehabilitation increases; land rehabilitation entails plugging the rent gap. If the potential land value in a certain area is determined by its attraction for people with strong purchasing power, then the result is gentrification.
34. Namely, sons staying in the parental home after marriage, with their new family unit.
35. According to Khawaja (2002, 27), between 1995 and 2000 almost 45,000 people moved from Damascus to other Syrian districts.
36. I have already mentioned Ghaned, a film director who recently purchased and restored a house in Qashla; he paid \$2 million – some £27,000 sterling – for it. The former owners had used it as a storehouse and workshop. The cost of restoration was as much again as the purchase price.
37. On the dislocation and resettlement of former inhabitants of the Old City of Fez, when protection plans started there, see Porter 2003, 127 – 'Neighbourhoods ... would be "dedensified"'.
38. A fair rent is among the constraints on economic liberalisation which have been removed in the past few years.
39. Erving Goffman (1961) terms 'secondary adjustments' those practices which individuals adopt when an entity, an institution or a politico-economic system tries to impose on them behavioural norms and existential models. 'Primary adjustments' are activities people carry out in conformity with institutional norms and models of self. Through secondary adjustments individuals propose alternative models of self, compromising or conflicting with institutional models.
40. *Salab*, also derived from the same root as *sallah*, means 'piety' (from the Latin *pietas*, namely compliance with religious norms); see Eickelman 2002, 267.
41. In 2000, in a bid to cut welfare expenditure, the Syrian government ended the policy, even in large Arab homes converted into private and state-owned condominiums, of fair rents for all.

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7

THE DOMESTIC HERITAGE: PUBLIC OR PRIVATE HERITAGE? THE CASE OF ALEPPO

Jean-Claude David

Several hundred hectares of districts in Damascus and Aleppo are classed as National Heritage and World Heritage sites. Over 100,000 people live in the old quarters of these two cities.

The recognition of the heritage qualities of these districts seems to rest on exogenous criteria rather than on collective local recognition. In theory it implies a change in status, a transition from the value of use to contemplation. However, for the still-inhabited classified districts, the break can only be relative and partial.

In 'Oriental' towns, the differentiation between public and private spheres, registered in the architecture and organisation of spaces, gives a paradoxical character to the classing of domestic ensembles (quarters) whose signs, decoration and identity, relating to the interior of the house, cannot only be perceived from the exterior. Of this domestic architecture without facades, whose lived interior is inaccessible, we only see the outside, from the street – which is only the reverse of the interior design. However, classifying and protecting a non-public heritage is not wholly without meaning, even if this measure is difficult to enact in practice: the identity evoked or represented by a heritage develops between the private and public spheres and is not only recorded in 'monuments', those public signs par excellence. Moreover, unlike appearances, the limits between private and public