Community-led Transformation Debates: The Relation to the Destroyed Heritage of the Old City of Aleppo

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Abstract

The consequences of armed conflict and physical destruction commonly create a call for transformation of the built environment. This study debated the visual (perceived) and mental (projected) transformation of historical places. This was based on the community of the Old City of Aleppo's perceptions and in the context of the Syrian conflict 2011-18.[1] With semi-structured interviews with eight decision-makers from academia and practice, this study investigated the potential routes of transformation and the changeable relationship with the damaged heritage[2] because of destruction. Findings were outlined in three arguments; restoring the Old City to more than 'as it was', accepting changes defined as a correction or upgrading, and the challenges of commemorating the war through built heritage. Discussing these findings in regard to the relationship with the destroyed heritage showed a correlation between transformation directions and relations' transformation. In addition, presenting war memories explored a contentious relation with the destroyed heritage.

Introduction

Turbulent and radical social changes within any community are pivotal factors in redefining the values held in the architectural structures as visual messages through the landscape (Piquard & Swenarton, 2011; Herscher, 2010). Transformation and rearrangement of the architectural norms, loyalty of place, meaning of place, and perceptions, are more likely to be challenged during, or as a result of, conflict. When a challenge occurs, what should be retained, corrected, upgraded, or significantly changed becomes a point of debate. Why the Old City of Aleppo? First, contextualizing the Old City within its Arab region, it is dissimilar to other examples, and is considered as having a well-preserved pattern with comparison to its urban development (Sevčenko, 1983). Despite the variety of historical layers, which have been added to the core of the Old City, it still reflects strong structural continuity since its Roman-Hellenistic rectangular grid[3] (Bianca 2000). However, the threat of radical transformation due to the conflicts' implications is expected. This comes from the large- scale and extensive levels of damage, with about 60% of the Old City destroyed (AAAS, 2014). Secondly, efforts, both locally and internationally, to create visions of the post-conflict Old City were represented through documentation and historical overviews (Kurgan et al., 2015), offering unrealistic propositions to link some of the Old City's significant buildings on the underground level (Bao, 2017), or imitating modern cities like Dubai by distributing skyscrapers all around the Citadel (IUSD Lab, 2016). However, attention was not given to discussing potential threats of any transformation.

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[1] The Old City was out of armed conflict and accessible in December 2016.
[2] The specific geography of the research is the route of Bab-Al Faraj Clock Tower, Seven Lakes roundabout, the Great Mosque of Umayyad, Souk Al Zerb, and the surrounding area of the Aleppo citadel.
[3] (3rd - 4th BC)

Visual and Mental Representations of Heritage

To understand how the heritage of the Old City of Aleppo is perceived during and after conflict, the values and meanings the heritage represents needs to be clarified. In addition, what associations the heritage emphasizes, or loses in the event of destruction, will be explored.

> *'Heritage is commonly understood as a process of conscious, purposeful remembrance for the political, cultural or economic needs of those in the present; it involves a subjective representation of valued objects, significant persons, places and symbolic events of the past.'*
> Sabine Marschall (Howard & Graham, 2008, 347).

What Marschall wrote stresses the complexity of nexuses that are generated by heritage. This rich narrative around heritage can justify the attention that has recently been given to protect more than the material culture. Community values materialized in architectural dimensions are also considered valid parts of the heritage scene and listed as meaning of place (Nasser, 2003). Meaning of place can also be related to a series of values that connect places and people through their personal perceptions and experiences of the built heritage. Deconstructing this narrative provided by heritage is inevitable when destruction occurs; where physical damage inflicted on heritage sites is often irreversible (Lang, 2013).

Heritage provides an explicit connection to the past. In the context of destruction, this leads to the loss of such a crucial connection between history and future generations. Destruction from conflict minimizes this connection with the past, leaving the community with the option of rebuilding and preserving what little is left. However, it is more likely that what is left is lost through unthoughtful management and lack of resources (Stenning, 2015). Herscher (2010) explains that the destruction of these linkages can result in the perception of the heritage as a mere product. Destruction usually displaces architecture from the architectural debate, if not the cultural domain more generally, and switches its position to the domain of violence. Through this shifting to violence, new epistemological frameworks are created; changing how architecture is perceived within these dramatic changes. In the end, this changes the architecture definition from its pre-conflict meanings and values (Krishnamurthy, 2012).

Methodology

A literature review and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to contextualize the research. The interviews were based around the retained visual image of the pre-conflict heritage, and the projected mental image, after conflict. In addition, how the incident of destruction was perceived is also investigated.

Data Collection

Eight semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2018, including academics, historians, professionals and members of protection committees. Due to the limited technical knowledge of most interviewees, the interviews were conducted via voice-only calls over the internet. Despite literature detailing the limitations of distance interviewing, the data was rich; containing a comprehensive variety of perceptions, and reflections on the situation before and after, including current examples. It served its purpose in bringing local community

perceptions. The selection criteria was based on:

- Relevant backgrounds or interests in the Old City; specializations in urban planning, sociology, the Master Plan of Aleppo, heritage, history and memory of Aleppo, reconstruction, architecture, and rehabilitation.
- Inclusion; local academics as well as private, governmental, international (UNESCO) and community sectors (both genders).
- Location; present in Aleppo at the time of interview.

Data Analysis

Data collected from phone interviews was handled through the framework: data reduction, data display, and conclusion, drawing with multiple cycles of coding (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014). The interviews were fully transcribed manually by the researcher. The interviews' duration varied between 45 to 180 minutes (including internet disconnections and unstable electricity in Aleppo). Through comprehensive reviewing of the multitude of relevant data, a first-cycle of coding was conducted. The reduced data was then displayed in a more organised and compressed way – tables and mind maps – to allow further interpretation and thematic analysis. In-depth noting and exploration of the patterns and regularities resulted in drawing conclusions of three scenarios of transformation (see below).

Ethics

Participants were informed about the research by both an 'Information Sheet' (clarified in English and orally in Arabic) and 'Consent Form'. The Consent Form indicated the conditions for participation – to be recorded, and whether to choose anonymity – clarified via numerous calls prior to interview. In addition, ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's university[4].

Analysis: Scenarios of Transformation

1. Restoring the Old City to more than "as-it-was"[5]

"The same as it was before war" is the generic desired future of the Old City from the perspective of the majority of the interviewees. However, the way the interviewees expressed this concept of conservation reveals a disagreement about what 'as it was' means. This adds another layer to the debate, as the interviewees introduced differing definitions of conservation. Very conservative meant applying only minor interventions that recreated the 2011 Old City (Kattoua, 2018), while it meant to Samman to restore its compact fabric – showing very different scales of understanding the reconstruction of the Old City. Also, conservation was defined to be a periodical transformation; the Old City's reconstruction will never be completed and will halt for financial reasons, but this will only be a temporary stop towards the 'as it was' concept. An incomplete image of the Old City does not mean that it is a distorted image as Seket (2018) said.

On the other hand, by acknowledging the absence of a clear definition of conservation, some pragmatic perceptions introduced transformation as a matter of fact. These less-optimistic observations were based on witnessing the interventions happening in the Old City in 2018. The Old City is seen to be moved to what Khangi (2018) called an 'abyss'. Transformation

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[4] Oxford Brookes University – MA in International Architectural Regeneration and Development – Thesis
[5] 'as it was' is referring to the time just prior to the start of the conflict in 2011.

is seen to occur because of individual reconstruction initiatives happening unevenly and without clear long-term strategy. The Old City is seen to face a different type of destruction because of random methods of reconstruction, materials and building techniques, leading to a change in its identity (Khangi, 2018). This observation mirrored Chikh-Mohamad's view about the heterogeneous future of the Old City. However, Chikh-Mohamad (2018) based his interpretation on the absence of a clear definition of 'reconstruction identity' and that Aleppo is a unique case. He predicted that the identity sought will be reached and clearly identified after many 'wrong attempts of reconstruction'. Still, when the situation is considered 'too vague to be judged' in the wider geographical context of the conflict[6] (Hadjar, 2018), the 'as it was' concept should not happen with the presence of uncertainty, instead it is better to pause the reconstruction until it is confirmed that there will be no further destruction.

2. Correction or Upgrading: subject to the reference point

Restoring the Old City was a recurring theme with all interviewees, however, when challenging the interviewees for further details about the imagined reconstructed Old City, they showed acceptance of changes under other definitions. For the majority, transformation is acceptable when it is positive. Positive changes for them are 'correction' and 'upgrading'.

Correction includes the removal of any irregularities occurring from the interventions happening outside the official manual of the Old City (Building Regulations and Control) and includes correcting any previous planning errors.[7] Olabi called the correction an 'historical chance', for example, the current excavation in the Great Umayyad Mosque benefited from destruction, as it revealed what was hidden "see Figure 1". This meant for Herbly and Samman the Cadastral Plan[8] as a reference point of reconstruction. Upgrading is the second feature for the future of the Old City. Olabi and Khangi highlighted the urgent demand for the Old City to be updated to meet the contemporary needs of its residents and to address what Olabi called the 'challenges of contemporary life'.

By dismissing any need for historical reference points, 'honesty' has been introduced by Chikh-Mohamad (2018) as a valid concept to lead the reconstruction of the Old City. Regardless of what kind of image the reconstruction process will produce, or the amount of change that may be needed – the main concept of this approach is to deal honestly with the post-conflict circumstances. This interpretation is extracted from Chikh-Mohamad's proposal for the Great Mosque's Minaret to be reconstructed, based on creativity and essential change, to emphasize what has happened; restoring the stone historical minaret to one of glass that spreads light in all directions as a symbolic representation of 'honesty'.

3. Controversies of commemorating the war

Implementing war memory on the built heritage landscape provides a variety of viewpoints; rejection, acceptance, and doubt of the influence and suitability of this representation in the Old City.

Rejection – representing war memories by leaving any destroyed part of the Old City, is seen as a "negative sign". This negativity is linked with unpleasant feelings, as leaving part of the destruction could trigger the community's negative memories. It was clear that one who refuses to accept the destruction, refuses to remember it – this was clearly illustrated in the

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[6] Hadjar (2018) meant that the Old City is not safe if it is still surrounded with conflict zones.

[7] Master Plan of the Old City in 1982 where parts of the organic layout were changed and where 4-5 storey buildings were implemented (Al-Siijin Street).

[8] Master Plan of the Old City in 1930 where the layout of the Old City was compact without any interventions by foreign planners.

absolute rejection by Kattoua and Seket (2018). Their responses correlated with the way they classified the period of war as a negative memory which should be erased. As Kattoua said:

'..It is going to be a scar..'.

However, acceptance asserted the importance of representing the war in order to create awareness in the future generations and for the sake of documenting the period (Khangi, 2018; Herbly, 2018). This was proposed and implemented in the Great Mosque where a few damaged stones were saved as a witness "see Figure 2 & 3". War representation was seen to have 'positive educational meanings', where this representation is philosophical, and meanings left to interpretation (Olabi, 2018). It was seen as a lesson for the next generation about persistence and perseverance in overcoming war and destruction (Herbly, 2018). Also, it can be an architectural lesson before being a humanitarian one, said Chikh- Mohamad, where architecture can neutrally help deliver the message of how horrible war is. This dialogue is difficult on the humanitarian level due to its sensitivity.

Acceptance of this representation was conditional upon; being in a specific small-scale location or positioning it where it can catch people's attention – without dominance, or through assigning it to less important destroyed buildings like informal settlements. The way all the interviewees visualized war representation clearly shows the lack of familiarity and comfort with this approach with the tendency to marginalize it.

Figure 1
Archaeological excavation

Figure 2
Damaged stones
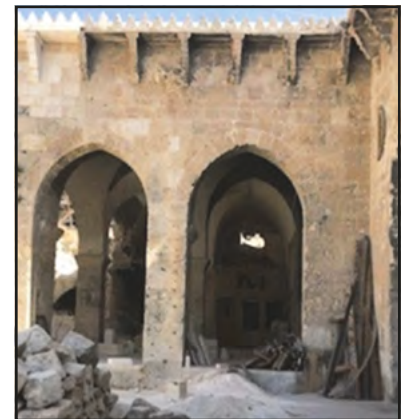
Figure 3
Affected intrernal elevation

Note: By Shekh-Debs, 2018, The Great Umayyad Mosque, The Old City of Aleppo, Syria.

Discussion: The relation with the destroyed heritage

Transformation directions lead to relations' transformation
The interviewees' initial responses gave a generic and emotional description about a fated and pre-decided transformational direction from destruction towards only conservation. This is represented by the thoughts of replicating the Old City of 2011, and their well-preserved mental image of the Old City. This fixed relation before and after destruction

disagrees with the irreversible situation introduced by Lang (2013). However, the detailed observations strongly suggest different directions of potential transformation; leading to a new heterogeneous Old City, and a destroyed Old City, through unthoughtful reconstruction. These rational perceptions agree with Lang (2013) and Stenning (2015) of a definite coming change. This consequently proposes an establishment of new relations towards the new Old City.

Also, establishing a new relation with the Old City that is different from 2011 is considered as valid, acceptable, and positive, when classified as a correction of previous faults. Interviewees saw their loyalty to the historical versions of the Old City as not threatening their loyalty to the city that they grew up and lived in. Going backwards in perception is understood as an assertion on history and adding more value to their relationship towards it. This might question the approach proposed by Stenning (2015) about breaking the narrative with the past, during conflict. Paradoxically, destruction can pave the way for an "original" narrative of the past.

On the other hand, going forward in perception, proposing to upgrade the Old City to stand in the face of contemporary challenges brings confusion to the relationship. This can relate to the inability to visualize what and how to upgrade in order to determine their relationship.

Discussing these findings in light of transformation, defining a clear reference point to the Old City to be restored to is the key factor in navigating the community's perceptions and their relations towards it.

Presenting war memory brings a controversial relation
Assigning a space in the Old City for war representation is very controversial. Rejecting this approach comes from perceiving the destruction as a visual negative memory, and so implementation would not help to forget and erase the conflict's memories. In addition, the same implementation of war memory could be perceived as a distorted action and negatively affect the continuity of the relationship with the Old City by blurring the preserved image in the community's perception.

Still, if accepted, this is subject to many negotiations on the style, location, dominance and size. These restrictions are clear indicators of the lack of validity for this approach in the communities' perceptions. The fear of accepting it frames a relationship that is always triggered by the existence of destruction. This could make heritage be perceived as a part of the violence and not merely architectural representation as Krishnamurthy (2012) argues.

Yet, if implemented, it can occasionally be a healing discourse. Accepting any war memory representation comes from the positive potential seen in investing in the damaged site. Also, this investment could offer a tool of reconciliation for current and future generations through the messages and interpretations left by both heritage and destruction. This greatly agrees with the concept of using the destroyed place as a tool for healing, discussed by Giblin (2013). Moreover, implementing war memory could be an emphasis on the continuity of the Old City as it would evidence how the Old City overcame war. This suggests a solid relation from its inhabitants when the Old City gives a lesson in resistance.

Conclusion

Through debating the transformation phenomena from the community's eyes, it is obvious that the community can greatly help read the scene and provide many indicators on which direction they wish their built heritage should take. It can also inform the practitioners and decision makers about the status of the collective memory of a destroyed place. The relation towards the built heritage is affected when the place is destroyed. Particularly, the affected two channels – past-present-future continuity and the present relationship between community and its heritage – make it a 'conflict of memory'. This challenges the community to re-establish connections with the historic damaged place again.

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Figures

Figure 1: Shekh-Debs, S. (Photographer). (2018, September 29). *Archaeological Excavation in the Process of Reconstruction at The Great Umayyad Mosque* [photograph]. Old City of Aleppo, Syria.

Figure 2: Shekh-Debs, S. (Photographer). (2018, September 29). *Damaged Stones at The Great Umayyad Mosque* [photograph]. Old City of Aleppo, Syria.

Figure 3: Shekh-Debs, S. (Photographer). (2018, September 29). *Affected Internal Elevation at The Great Umayyad Mosque* [photograph]. Old City of Aleppo, Syria.