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The Urban Development of Damascus: A study of its past, present and future

UCL MSc European Property Development and Planning Dissertation
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Being a Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of The Built Environment as part of the requirements for the award of the MSc in European Property Development and Planning at University College London:

I declare that this Dissertation is entirely my own work and that ideas, data and images, as well as direct quotations, drawn from elsewhere are identified and referenced.

Signed:

Date:

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Interviews

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Professor of Urban Development, University of Damascus. Interview 14th June 2008. Tour of Illegal Settlements, 16th June 2008.

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Architect & Independent Property Developer, Damascus and Manchester, UK. Interview 8th June 2008.

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Managing Director of EMAAR Syria. Interview, 14th June 2008.

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Project Manager at Bin Laden Group, Damascus. Interview 14th June 2008

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Abstract

Despite holding the title of the ‘oldest continuously inhabited city in the world’, Damascus has seldom been the focus of academic research in urban studies. As the city has been of prime importance to major historical Empires, this study of Damascus’ urban development reflects global shifts in culture, religion, and economics over time. The problems Damascus faces today are in many ways representative of those in other Less Developed Countries. Moreover, particularly in the Middle East where factors such as oil and water supply come in to play, the outcomes increasingly affect tomorrow’s globalised world as a whole.

Currently the capital of a closed ‘market-socialist’ economy, Damascus is now attempting to reposition itself as a ‘modern’ city, with various new reforms paving the way for it to become a centre of trade, commerce and tourism. However, it is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site whose proud status is under threat as it disregards historical buildings, and struggles with one of the world’s highest urban growth rates, exacerbated inequality and endemic corruption.

Therefore, developers are faced with important questions: What does it mean to be a modern city? In a Less Developed Economy, where should priorities lie?

To better understand Damascus’ present situation, this paper provides an in-depth analytical study of the city’s urban formation, from Ancient times until today. It is written chronologically, taking into account changes in land tenure policy, political environments and economic situations that have influenced development. To provide a contemporary context, this paper also carries interviews with key players in Syrian property development, including developers, investors, academics and members of parliament. Further interviews with architects, civil engineers and local Damascenes add local insight.

By placing these first-hand accounts within a historical socio-economic context, this paper is a unique examination of Damascus and a useful reference for future development.

Aside from government reforms to combat corruption, this paper concludes that long-term, educated strategies need to be adopted to safeguard the city's historical wealth, preserving social cohesion and its potential for tourism. New industrial cities outside traditional urban areas would help manage high urban populations, and reduce pressure on the fragile ecological basin of Damascus.

Introduction

This is a study of the historic city of Damascus, the capital of the Syrian Arab Republic. Whilst ever proud of its status as “the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world¹”, Damascus today is also striving to become a modern capital, with various new reforms paving the way for it to become a centre of trade, commerce and tourism. However this year, as Damascus celebrates its title of The Arab Capital Of Culture, UNESCO has threatened to withdraw its World Heritage Site status unless guarantees are made to protect historic buildings. City planners and politicians are therefore faced with important questions: What does it mean to be a modern city? In a Less Developed Economy, where should priorities lie?

With an urban history spanning 5000 years, the old city of Damascus as a whole is a World Heritage Site. As such, it is unique for its preservation of a complete urban fabric including its residential quarters, as opposed to being home to a few isolated monuments. Aleppo, Syria’s second city is the only other large town across the Eastern Mediterranean – from Greece to Iraq – which has preserved Ottoman domestic architecture on such a scale. According to the International Council of Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS (Weber, 2002) approximately half of the 16,832 houses listed in the 1900 Ottoman yearbook in the province of Damascus are still standing.

Like other Less Developed Countries, Syria is faced with many constraints affecting both development and preservation, including growing unemployment rates, unskilled labour force and problems associated with rapid urbanisation and rural-urban migration. Furthermore, Damascus’ location as the centre of a large oasis in the desert, *Al-Ghouta*, creates further problems given its fragile ecological environment. Unchecked rapid urbanisation led to the destruction of *Al-Ghouta*, which has provided the city with agriculture and “an ecological

¹ Damascus is one of three cities which each claim to be ‘the oldest continuously inhabited city’ in the world. The three contenders are, Byblos in Lebanon, Aleppo and Damascus in Syria.

balance for the past thousands of years” (Al-Mhanna, W. 2008). As desertification spreads, water supply and management has become a growing concern.

In addition, with the recent arrival of an estimated 1.4 million Iraqi refugees (O’Donnell & Newland, 2008), pressures on the existing water supply and infrastructure has led to city wide water shortages and black-outs. (Joukhadar, 2008)

According to studies by Nabil Sukkar (2006), the Executive Director of the Syrian Consulting Bureau for Investment and Development, Syria also suffers from a weak GDP growth rate due to a stagnant production structure, rapidly depleting oil reserves and an inability to compete in the global economy.

Now looking to reinvigorate its economy and mitigate these limitations, various government reforms have been adopted in the past six years. Tourism was adopted as a ‘pillar for development’ in 2002 (Agha Al-Kalaa, 2008), and foreign investment is increasingly encouraged. As a result over US\$7 billion worth of real estate & industrial developments are planned in Syria over the next 10 years (Al Kifah Al Arabia, 2006). Indeed, according to project manager Tamer Kawa, Syria as a whole is “fast becoming the new place for construction and property investment in the Middle East...With booming oil prices, and instability in Western financial markets, foreign speculators, especially from the Gulf and other Arab states, have begun seeking opportunities in developing economies, like Syria” (Kawa, 2008).

However, while the Syrian press boasts of new planned luxury developments including international shopping malls and five star hotels, many argue such investments are misplaced, claiming they will exacerbate Syria’s existing problems of a growing wealth gap, disproportionately rising house prices, and the prevalence of urban slums. As indicated by the threatened withdrawal of its

World Heritage Site status, there is also criticism that the current plans for development will actually destroy the buildings on which Damascus prides itself and on which its attraction for tourists depends.

While heritage conservationists lobby for more historically sensitive planning, the government is faced with many complex urban issues. Furthermore, as the capital city, the impetus to rapidly modernise is greatly amplified as its development is intrinsically linked to both the wider economy and international political affairs. This study will therefore focus on some of the main constraints to development in Damascus, and analyse the solutions adopted to mitigate them.

This paper will begin with an in-depth analytical study of Damascus' urban formation, starting from its establishment in Ancient times until today. It is written chronologically, taking into account changes in land tenure policy, political environments and economic situations that have influenced the city's development. Thus, providing an understanding of both the city's historical wealth and its economic circumstance.

Given the limited time and length available for this report, many issues of urban development will not be covered. Furthermore, it is important to note that international academic resources on urban policy and planning in Syria are minimal. Given the current political environment, most 'Western' journal articles regarding Syria focus on Syria's relationship with Israel, its role in Lebanon, its involvement with 'terrorist insurgents' and issues of human rights.²

Even in Syria itself, research into urban development is sparse. As Hillenbrand (2003) explains, the study of Islamic architecture and development, in particular, is a Western monopoly, and due to the lack of funds for libraries in the

² Inputting 'Syria' into the search engines for the International Journal for Middle East Studies, Middle East Studies, MERIP Middle East Report, Middle East Journal and Middle East Policy.

poorer countries of the Arab world, such studies are hard to find³. Furthermore, as Arnaud (2006) states, in comparison to the medieval and historical development of the city, “le developpement de XXe siecle a ete assez peu etudie.” (p.9) In Fries’ 2000 PhD thesis, he goes as far as saying, “l’urbanism au Levant est oublie des chercheurs” with studies of Syria and Damascus in general very rare (p. 3). Therefore, a survey of Syrian urban policy, especially contemporary development requires in-the-field investigation.

Interviews with current key players in Syrian property development, including developers, investors, academics and members of parliament and further discussions with architects, civil engineers and local Damascenes add local insight. By bringing together these current points of view and first hand accounts of working within the field, this study provides a unique examination of Damascus and current developments.

³ Ironically, the countries with the most available funds for such publications often have the least interesting architectural history, e.g. the Emirates, Saudi Arabia.

2. The Urban formation of Damascus

2.1 Introduction

Syria, as it is known today, is a very young country; its borders were broadly defined by the Sykes-Picot⁴ agreement in 1916, and its establishment as an independent nation came after the Second World War in 1946⁵. Located south of Turkey, it borders the Mediterranean Sea and Lebanon to the West, Jordan and Israel/Palestine to the South and Iraq to the East. The capital, Damascus, is located in the southwest and is the political and cultural centre of the country.

Map 1 – Syria and its surroundings



Source: Google Maps

⁴ The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret contract devised by the British and French governments during WWI. While the Allies fought against the Ottomans, the British encouraged the Arabs, who had been part of the Turkish Empire for over 400 years, to revolt and fight for Arab independence, thus weakening the enemy. The British promised an independent Arab state to the Emir of Mecca, Sharif Hussein Bin Ali. However, at the close of the Great War, the victors reneged on their promises, and the ‘Arab’ world was divided up between the British and the French according to their secret plans. This disloyalty is still fresh in many Arabs’ minds, and underlies a strong distrust of the West and its intentions (Farsoun, 2002).

⁵ The Sykes-Picot agreement placed Syria under a French mandate, which stipulated that Syria would gain independence within three years of the mandate. However, the French remained in power until after WWII their rule lasting 25 years. The French conceded control due to an increased surge of Syrian nationalism and international pressures (Sharabi, 1966).

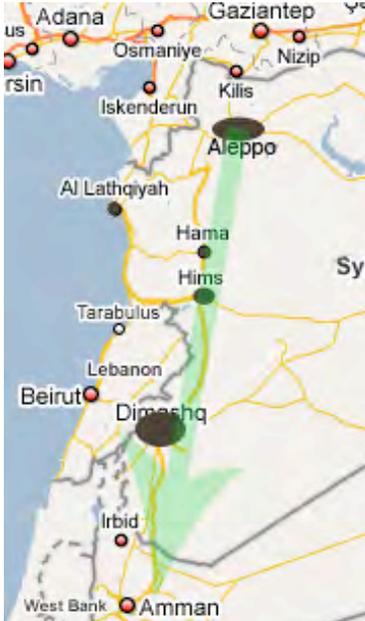
However, Syria is a land that has been inhabited since ancient times. Given its strategic location, firmly placed between East and West, Syria has long been the battleground site and “victim of various regional and international balances of power” (Quilliam, 1999, p.27). Its strategic importance is illustrated by its long and turbulent history; archaeologists have unearthed evidence of habitation dating back to about 5000B.C. (Arabnet, 2002). It is said to incorporate some of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and as a result it has a “long and vast urban history. In many regions of the world one views urbanism in terms of centuries, whereas in [Syria] millennia are more appropriate” (Bonine, 1977, p. 141).

After over one thousand years as the centre of Islamic empires⁶, Syria’s main cities have developed along an almost straight line, north to south, following the traditional pilgrimage route to Mecca.⁷ Map 2 (below) shows the largest cities in Syria, marked by circles proportional to their size. As visible, Damascus and Aleppo are the two major centres, both having been developed as chief trading stops.

⁶ Muslim Arabs first conquered Syria in 636 AD when Damascus became the capital of the Umayyad dynastic empire and then was conquered by the Abbasids. At the end of the 11th century, the Crusaders arrived in the region and Syria became incorporated in to the Christian Kingdom Jerusalem until Salah al-Din defeated them at the end of the 12th century. From 1516, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of First World War. (Quilliam, 1999) Therefore Syria was under Islamic rule from 636 until 1916, except for 100 years under the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem.

⁷ Before Islam, Mecca was an important trading post on the caravan route from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, and a major pilgrimage destination for all faiths, (Lapidus, 1969)

Map 2 – Syria’s largest cities



Source: Adapted from Google Maps (2008)

Both Aleppo and Damascus are also held up as examples of cities developed in ‘typical Islamic’ style, with features that are still visible today. However, caution must be taken when using Islam as a means to describe urban development. As Bonine (1977) states, “a major segment of literature on the Middle Eastern city during Islamic times is the work of ‘Orientalists’...[who] consider religion, and specifically Islam, as the primary factor in the lives of Middle Eastern inhabitants. This view encompasses the urban environments, and so cities are seen as a manifestation of religious ideals.” A clear example of this ‘Orientalism’ is found in Acun’s (2002) ‘A Portait of the Ottoman Cities’ where she stipulates that: “The spread of Islam occurred necessarily in conjunction with the building of the cities. Being essentially an urban religion conforming to urban life, Islam regulated urban society and determined the basic elements of the urban culture” (Acun, 2002, p. 260).

Such analysis tends to overlook the impact of the early formation of Roman and

Hellenistic cities on Middle Eastern urban development, even though they defined the structural core of the cities that are still in existence today. As Ira Lapidus (1973) clearly illustrates, the conquering Arabs rarely founded and built new cities, instead they settled in the already established cities and villages. Furthermore he asserts, “the evidence does not show...cities to be necessary to Islam, or to the Arab-Muslim concept of a full Muslim life...any exclusive association of Islam and urbanism would be misleading.”

However, in saying that, Islam’s influence should not be totally ignored as Stefano Bianca (2000) explains in his extensive work ‘Urban Form in the Arab World’. Whether built on Hellenistic or Roman or Byzantine heritage, Islamic cities have common denominators, including responding to similar climatic conditions, socioeconomic factors, vernacular building techniques and a strong spiritual identity. This will be explored more fully later.

This section is written chronologically, with the first part focusing on the early history of Damascus. It is important to note, that while research on the development of cities across the Middle East has focused on the ‘Islamic’ element and ancient archaeological heritage, research on the socio-economic development of cities is rare and “we are, therefore, as yet far from being able to construct a full portrait of the...cities” (Acun, 2002, p.255). This urban history will therefore be based on generalizations of urban formation in the pre-Ottoman period. Given the available research, and the fact that Damascus strongly correlates to the typical ‘Islamic city’, a brief description of Islamic urban development will also be included. Maps will be used to illustrate the urban formations of Syria’s premier city.

2.2 Damascus: Its early formation

Damascus is situated on a large plain along the limit of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range where the River Barada begins. With only an average of 200mm of rainfall per year, water management has been a crucial problem for the development of this oasis city (Arnaud, 2006). Given the area's topography, the city was established between two hostile zones: the mountain summit, where there is risk of the river swelling due to its gentle slopes - and the foot of the mountain, where the closeness of the phreatic layer⁸ inhibits extensive dense urban development. The site established slightly overhangs the riverbed and constitutes a valley deep enough to contain floods (Arnaud, 2006).

The city of Damascus started as an important caravan centre and fertile oasis at the junction of important trade routes, according to ancient Accadian and Egyptian documents. Three major roads led out of the city; the western road led towards Egypt, the southern road led to Mecca, and the eastern road led to Babylon (Lapidus, 1973).

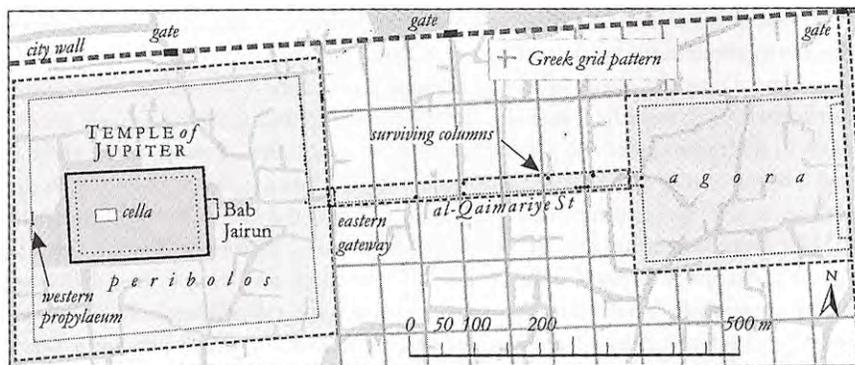
As early as 3000BC, the early urban form of Damascus began to unfold. City walls were built around the settled area with "straight wide streets radiating outward from the concentration of public buildings in the centre" (Bonine, 1977, p. 145). However it was the Hellenic era (336-146 BC) that first strongly contributed to the city's morphological legacy. Bonine (1977) highlights the grid street patterns, public baths, temples, theatres, sport stadiums, agora and the porticos.

Figure 1 shows a small area of the Greek development in Syria with the Greek grid road pattern is superimposed on the current road plan of the old city. The site of the Greek temple is today the site of the Umayyad Mosque. While today's roads no longer follow the original grid, various studies by French and German scholars have discerned "in the higgledy-piggledy alleys and lanes of the walled

⁸ The phreatic layer is the layer of soil or rock found below the water table permanently saturated with groundwater.

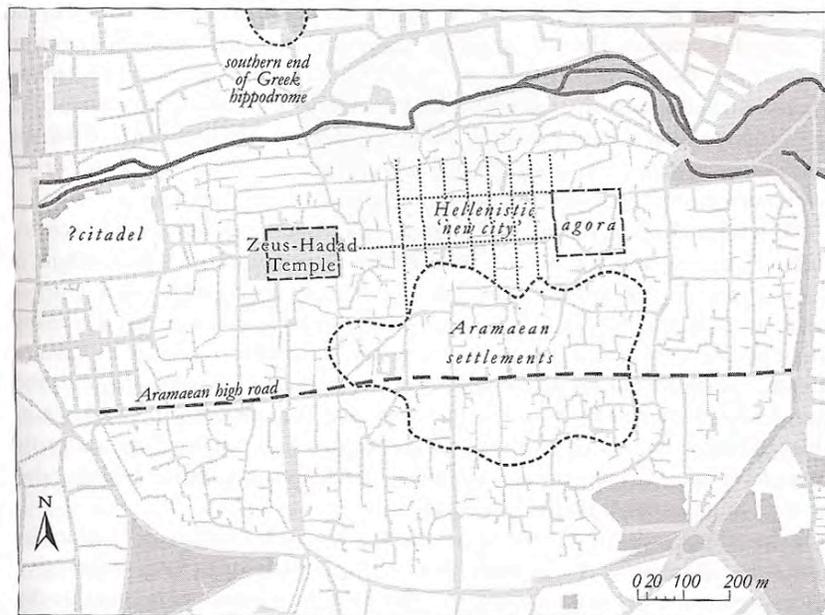
city indications of the strict grid plan...Every now and then, a lane following the orthography of the grid jumps to the next parallel street. A thoroughfare that once [cut] across the city temporarily ends in a cul-de-sac but resumes after leaping a cluster of family homes” (Burns, 2005, p.36). Fig 2 shows the Greek city located within today’s old city.

Fig. 1 The Greek Temple of Jupiter and Damascus street map



Source: Burns (2005)

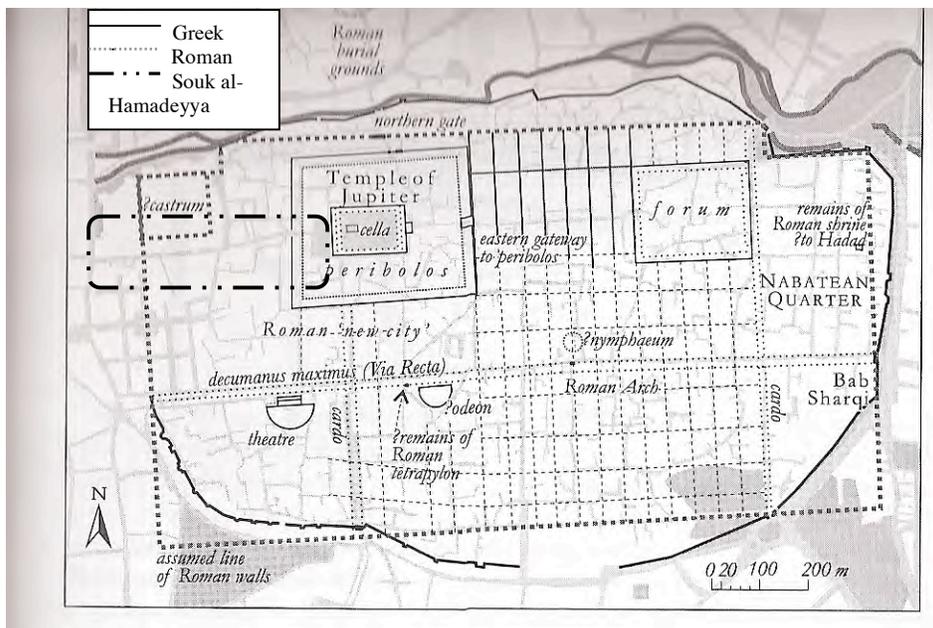
Figure 2 The Greek city located within today’s Damascus old city walls



Source: Burns (2005)

The Romans followed the Greeks, developing the existing cities, and establishing new ones. In 64BC Syria became a central province of the Roman Empire – boasting grand cities with famed monuments such as those still visible today at Palmyra, Bosra and Antioch (in what is now Turkey). As Fig 3 shows, Roman Damascus was approximately the same size as the old walled city of today. *Via Recta* (Straight Rd) remains today, running from Bab Sharqi to Bab al-Jabiya (see map 11) two of the seven gates of the Roman city. The Romans expanded the Greek Temple of Jupiter and the agora, and as visible in Fig 3, extended the grid system. The Romans also developed the first system of water pipes,⁹ remnants of which can still be seen in today’s *Qanawat*¹⁰ district (Burns, 2005).

Figure 3 The Roman city of Damascus



Source: Burns (2005)

⁹ Or are the earliest water systems in Syria to be known to archaeologists.

¹⁰ *Qanawat* is Arabic for aqueduct.

Photograph 1 and 2 The remains of the Roman Temple of Jupiter



Source: Author's own.

Photos 1 and 2 show the remains of the gates of the Roman Temple of Jupiter from the Western approach (marked on Fig 3) Picture 1 faces east, in the background is the Ottoman built Souk il Hamadeiyeh. Picture 2 faces west taken from inside the Souk - just visible in the background is the domed top of the Umayyad mosque, located on the site of the Roman temple.

Roman control ceased in 636 AD, when Syria became part of the Islamic Umayyad dynasty.

2.3 Damascus under Islamic Rule

As Lapidus (1973) describes, contrary to many ideas of 'Islamic urbanism', the early Umayyad city was not one of grand designs and developments. New cities were rarely built, with new settlers, the Arab garrisons typically settling into the existing quarters of the conquered cities. As echoed by Kennedy (1985), urban life and economic activity continued on the same sites, "Paradoxically, however, this continuity of social and political function did not result in a continuity of architectural design and urban planning, even in cities like Damascus...The broad, colonnaded streets were invaded and divided up by intrusive structures, both houses and shops, and became more like narrow winding lanes than the majestic thoroughfares of classical antiquity; and the extensive, open agora, scene for markets and meetings, was gone" (Kennedy, 1985, p.4-5).

In 750 AD the grand Umayyad Mosque was complete, built on the site of the Church of St. John¹¹ (Flood, 1997). Major features of the city that altered during the early Islamic period were the street layout (as described above), the design and scale of bathhouses, and the development of linear, roofed *sucs*, or markets (Kennedy, 1985). The role of government in the development and maintenance of urban centres also underwent great modifications due to the minimalist state of the Empire and indeed the nature of Islam. As Bianca (2000) states, "The most significant social implication of Islam is the strength of ritualised living patterns which dispenses the need of formal institutions", and therefore, municipal authorities for town planning and civic affairs did not form in Muslim cities.

As Kennedy (1985) describes, each city was provided with city walls for security, a mosque and a supply of running water, essential for the daily ritual of Wadu'.¹² Furthermore, given the importance of private property in Islam, house owners were free to build or extend their properties, as long as their neighbours

¹¹ The church was built towards the end of the fourth century on the former site of the Roman temple. (Flood, 1997)

¹² Wadu', a religious ablution, is performed five times a day before Muslim prayers.

were not 'offended.' Hence the association of narrow streets with 'Islamic' cities, as property owners expanded their homes unconstrained. In addition, pack animals were the preferred form of transport, with wheeled chariots becoming obsolete in late antiquity therefore reducing the need for wide streets. These developments, which are conventionally attributed to 'Islamic' cities, happened slowly, taking a number of centuries to form (Kennedy, 1985). As Bianca (2000) describes, traditional Islamic cities followed an "organic pattern of growth" (p.31).

Another interesting feature of Islamic cities is the organization of residential quarters by tribe, or ethnicity – a trait which existed strongly until the 1960s (Ayoub Agha, 2008; See Map 3). However, it is important to note, that while ethnicity corresponded to separate quarters in the city, the different religious or ethnic groups were not isolated, as they worked and socialized together (see: Al-Qattan, 2002).

While this map is divided by the major religions, it is important to note that the Muslims, in particular, are not homogenous and can represent different tribes, sects and ethnicities, such as the Druze, or the Kurds (shown), who also tended to live in separate quarters. Most residential areas housed a variety of socio-economic groups, although there were exceptions, such as the wealthy neighbourhood of A'mara, and some exclusively Muslim areas which were also defined by a trade (Khoury, 1984).

The first comprehensive ‘town-planning’ of Damascus to take place under Islamic rule¹³ occurred after the victory over the Crusaders, and the rise to power of Nur-al Din, Sunni leader of the Ayyubids, in the mid-twelfth century. Burns (2005) calls this “the city’s new golden age...a period of building that is unmatched in any other century of the city’s history” (p. 158). Given the increased security under their strong leader, Damascenes were able to live unworried outside the city walls, and residential areas were encouraged extra-muros, in Uqayba – just north of the city walls, and southwest beyond Shaghir.

Public works, which had been neglected for centuries, including the water supply, were improved, and large areas of the old city underwent rigorous regeneration. This included reinforcing the Roman gates, and the city walls. Due to Nur-Al-Din’s piety, many religious buildings were also erected, including the first surviving hospital of the Islamic world. During this time satellite suburbs also began to be established; including Salihiye, at the base of Jebel Quassioun mountain, Maydan in the south-west, Saruja in the north and ‘Amara in the north-west. These districts originally arose on roads leading out of the city, near the tombs of religious figures.

¹³ It is interesting to note that while Damascus did not undergo much town planning in the first hundred years of Islamic rule (aside from state built mosques, bath houses and water systems), new cities were created in Syria and were centrally planned – these tended to be developed with wide streets and open spaces, contradicting the overriding view of Islamic cities.

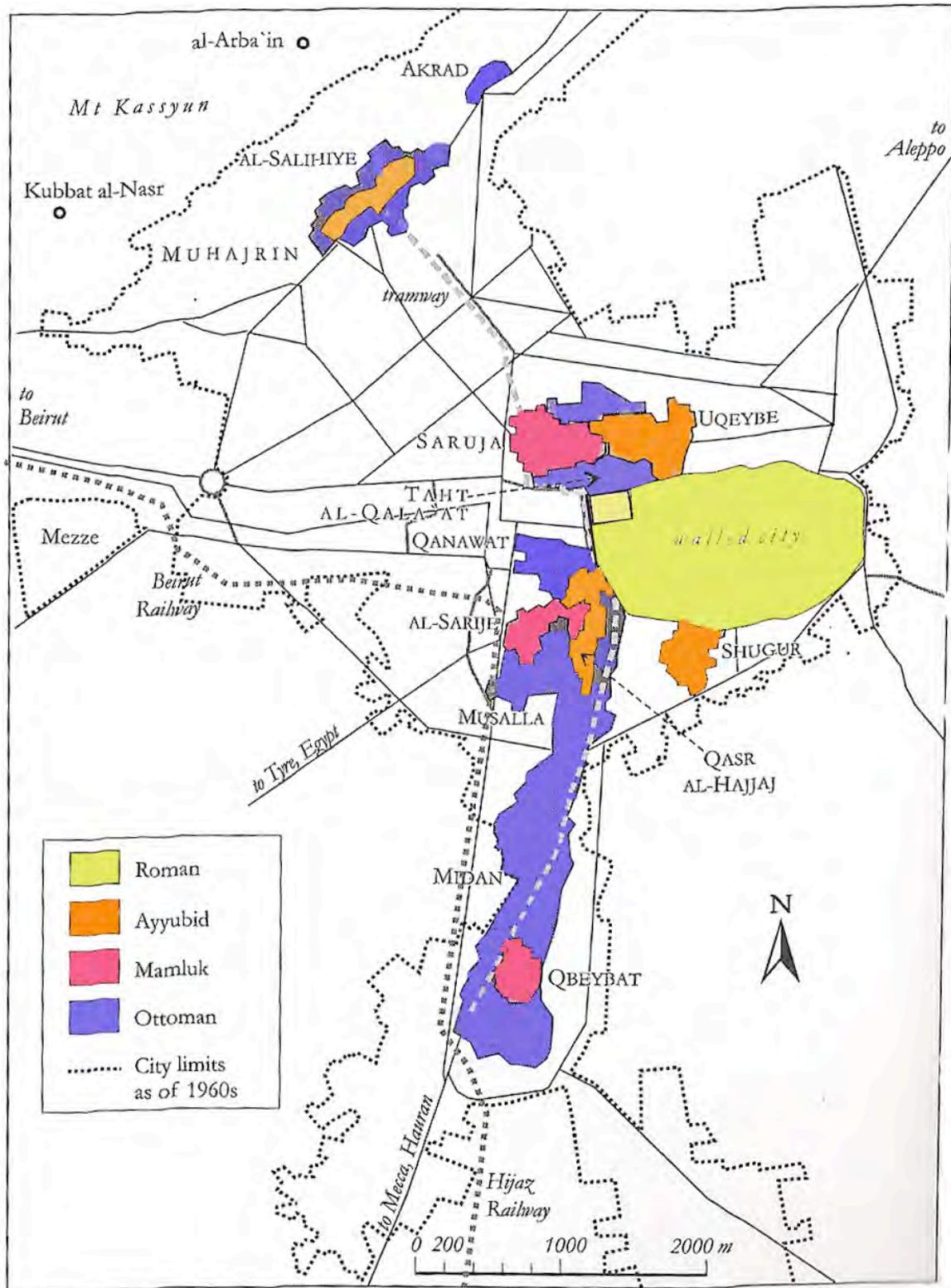
2.4 Damascus under the Ottoman Empire

From their rise to power in the mid-sixteenth century, the Ottomans focused on religion to unite their diverse subjects. Under Islamic rule, Damascus became a major meeting-point for caravans of pilgrims undertaking the holy hajj to Mecca. Hajj was carefully organised around two caravans, one from Damascus, the other from Cairo, placing Damascus back as the centre of the Empire.¹⁴ As the Empire expanded, so did the number of pilgrims, with between 25,000-60,000 people assembling in the Maydan district of Damascus twice each year – once at the start of the journey, and then at the return. “Le volume des transactions commerciales réalisées á la faveur de cet événement est considerable” (Arnaud, 2006, p. 34). In addition, 2 or 3 caravans of up to 2000 camels would stop in Damascus every year bringing goods from the East, (China, Japan, India, Baghdad) before continuing on to Istanbul and Cairo. These trade voyages continued until the 19th century.

These migrations added over 30% to the city’s inhabitants during the Hajj and commercial success led to major shifts in the city formation, with the fast expansion of suburbs. The Maydan area, south of the old city, became fully incorporated into the city as a residential suburb and a major agricultural centre, given its more rural location. Map 4 shows the expansion of Damascus suburbs through time. As visible, the settlements outside the old-city followed the pilgrimage route south towards Mecca. The initial development around Maydan Street filled out, and settlements emerged following the road up to Saliheye. In 1516, extra-muros settlements had totalled 64 hectares; by 1850 it had almost tripled to 184 hectares (Burns, 2005).

¹⁴ During the 12th and 13th centuries, Damascus suffered earthquakes, outbreaks of plague, attacks from Crusaders and assaults from raiding Mongols. While the overriding influence of the Mamluks (1260-1515) maintained the Islamic direction of the city, Cairo had become the political and economic centre of the Mamluk Empire, reducing the maintenance of Damascus further.

Map 4 Historical Development of Damascus



Source: Al-Qattan (2002)

3. History of Land Tenure under the Ottomans:

This section will provide an overview of land tenure and reform, looking at its modifications from the time of the Ottoman Empire until after World War Two. According to Issawi (1966), landownership has been the main form of wealth and the principle determinant of income, political power and social prestige in the Arab World for thousands of years. During the Ottoman Empire, Syria was incorporated into the *timar* system; an administrative system much like other feudal systems where land belonged to the state and the ruler, with notable families deriving wealth from taxation and feudal estates. Serfs paid *iltizam*, taxes proportionate to the size of land cultivated or to the crop (Acun, 2002; Lewis, 1979).

In the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman feudal system began to change, as the Ottomans began to reform the “functions of the state towards a more European model” (Burns, p.2005, p.249), leading to the abolition of the *iltizam* system and the rise of private property. In addition, an increased influx of European manufactured goods¹⁵ began to challenge the urban economy, leading to “industrial collapse” (Acun, 2002, p. 273) and which pressured the “profit-hungry city notables” (Khoury, 1983, p.5) to seek capital in the countryside:

“Many peasants, and in some cases whole villages, lost their lands to the notables and turned to sharecropping; others less fortunate, were completely dispossessed and either became wage labourers on the estates of big landowners, or fled to small towns and cities” (Khoury, 1983, p.5).

Cash cropping, agrarian commercialization and the development of modern means of communication and transport, stimulated further the growth of large

¹⁵ Capitulations, of lower tariff barriers to foster trade and economic ties, were granted to “just about every European country” by the 19th century, and the US by 1818. (Hershlag, 1964, p. 43). These paired with the 1858 Anglo-Ottoman Trade Agreement forced the Ottoman Empire to become an open market where European goods were bought and sold freely with low customs tariffs.

landed estates. In mid-nineteenth century, the 1858 Ottoman Land Code was introduced as a means to increase and regulate tax collection, by requiring land ownership registration and permits for development. Thus, private landownership was formalized, and by the early twentieth century a powerful group of landowning families had emerged in Syria (Barakat, 1993).

In contrast to the agricultural sector, the role of the state in the urban economy was limited to the provision (ownership and operation) only of public utilities (water, and later electricity, postal, telephone etc) and infrastructure (roads, railways, seaports communication networks, sewers etc). The urban industries were privately owned, and “the state did not own any industrial manufacturing for commercial purposes” (Aziz al-Ahsan, 1982, p.302).

Indeed, Damascus became a hub of real estate activity; much capital and effort was invested in home ownership, with few instances of rentals. Given the growing insecurity of the Ottoman economy, home-ownership was considered a form of financial security. Al-Qattan (2002) also highlights the “relative ease with which homes could be bought and sold” sparking a dynamic speculative market where men and women would purchase “a property only to turn around and sell it for profit, sometimes within a few days” (Al-Qattan, 2002, p. 519-520). (Interestingly enough, such speculative activity has become common again, with some properties changing hands every few days.)

However, it is important to note that the majority of properties bought and sold speculatively in urban centres during the 19th century, were merely shares. Given the inheritance laws in Islam, property is divided amongst all heirs¹⁶ This led to an active market where, “the sale and purchase of shares of houses – as opposed to entire properties – dominated the real estate market, and relatively few houses were sold in their entirety. Of the total of 944 properties traded between and among the different religious groups, only 30 percent (323)

¹⁶ Property belonging to a man is divided in the ratio 2:1.5:1, sons:widow:daughters respectively.

involved entire properties” (Al-Qattan, 2002, p.521). The sale of shares between families to reconsolidate ownership of homes/estates was also a major segment of the market. This was possible due to the traditional design of the Arabic house, or *dar*, which allowed for a number of families to inhabit one property.¹⁷

During the Ottoman Empire, land tenure was recorded in great detail, with land distribution and taxation primarily dictated by Sharia (Islamic) Law.¹⁸

¹⁷ A *dar*, is the traditional form of housing across the Middle East. Its main characteristics include an interior open-air courtyard usually with a fountain and/or fruit trees. Surrounding the courtyard would be the bedrooms in separate quarters, traditionally inhabited by the extended family, and the communal kitchen and bathrooms.

¹⁸ As emphasized by Lewis (1979) Islamic Law on land tenure and taxation was not unchanging, it was modified throughout the centuries, according to rulers, customs and regimes.

4. The end of Ottoman Rule - 1860-1919

The last sixty years of Ottoman Rule are known as the Tanzimat Period, literally 'the reorganisation period'. It was a time of administrative reform and modernisation and a new emphasis on city planning and development evolved due in part to the increased prosperity from European trade. "During these 50 years [1860-1910] the city was transformed at a rate not experienced since Nur-al-Din's time" (Burns, 2000, p.255). "Damas est touchés par d'importantes transformations, de nouvelles modalités de développement et de modernisation de l'espace urbain se mettent en place" (Arnaud, 2006, p. 9).

The new urbanism that developed during Tanzimat was based on 3 principles, set by the Grand Vizier Mustafa Rachid Pasha:

- 1 - widening of streets and roads, removing dead-ends and cul-de-sacs
- 2 - the design of new suburbs with geometric rules
- 3 - construct in stone instead of wood.

Rachid Pasha also proposed to bring in Western architects to develop plans, and to send Ottoman students abroad to train.

Up until the 19th century Damascus had mostly developed to the south on the right bank of the river. But from 1860 until 1919, the city grew almost 25% in area, while its population doubled, filling out the space between intra-muros and the Maydan suburb, Saruja and Uqaba (see map 5). By the end of the Empire, almost 90% of the urban expansion was on the left bank of the river (Arnus, Qassa, Jisr) and spreading northwards. Fries (2000) attributes this to the ease of domestic water supply facilitated by canals which irrigated the northern part of al-Ghouta.

By the end of the 19th century, the urban fabric of Damascus became less and less dense, as new residential suburbs were developed with immense gardens and wide streets, as well as the development of public parks. As Arnaud (2006) clearly states, contrary to popular belief, “the work of town-planners and extensions of the city occurred well before the establishment of the French mandate.”

In 1894, Damascus’ first planned residential quarter, and the only one to be founded by a public authority under Ottoman rule, was developed. Al-Muhajarin was initially established to accommodate refugees¹⁹, mainly Christians and Muslims fleeing massacres²⁰. It was exceptionally located upon a steep slope close to the city centre, with superb views of the city and its surroundings

Photo 3 – the view from Al-Muhajarin



Source: Author

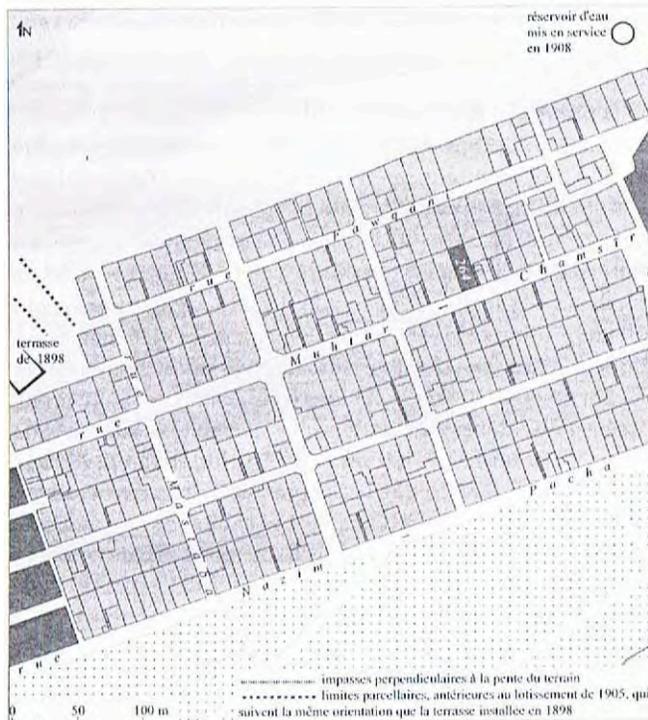
Plots were cut up into square parcels of at least 400 square meters; “on peut être étonné que des terrains presentent de telles qualités aient été offert à des

¹⁹ Al-Muhajarin literally means ‘the refugees’.

²⁰ In 1860, 5000 Christians were massacred within a few days as financial difficulties spread through Damascus. This led to a high migration of Christians out of Bab Tuma.

migrants, on peut aussi s'étonner de la taille des parcelles, elles semblent immenses en comparaison avec celles des quartiers populaires recent qui mesurent le plus souvent moins de 100 metres carrées” (Arnaud, 2006, p. 169).

Fig 4 Section of Al-Muhajarin layout 1945



Source: Arnaud (2006) p.174

In actual fact, the total 45 hectares of this quarter was built above the river and therefore suffered from inaccessibility to water; as a result the land was uncultivated, and therefore cheap for the refugees. The first houses were built in 1896 for refugees from Romania. In 1900 Christians installed themselves 200 meters away from the Romanians. The parts of Al-Muhajarin closest to the city were portioned off, built and occupied by Damascenes and Turks. In 1908 a large reservoir was developed improving the standard of living, and pushing house prices up.

Al-Muhajarin is an exception in Ottoman urban development: later suburbs that emerged to the north of Damascus were not planned out, with plots rarely taking

rectangular shapes as buildings were developed randomly over time; these new suburbs have numerous impasses and cul-de-sacs, with no visible planning – similar to the ancient quarters of the old city (Arnud, 2006). Fries (2000) attributes this to the weakening of the administration system due to various political and economic disruptions. (See: Fries 2000.)

Nevertheless, by the end of Ottoman Rule, Damascus had “numerous manifestations of modernity” (Fries, 2000), including 3 train stations, street-lights and electric tramways, large hotels, theatres, cafes. Commercial linkages with the West led to the establishment of banks and remodelling of the old souks whilst political reforms saw the building of a town hall, new schools and hospitals. To further encourage trade with Europe and to enhance the image of their cities to the West, the Ottomans also built the first Syrian university, west of the old city in the Baramke district.

Communication lines, the postal and telegraph systems, were also developed to a very high standard across the Empire, however, public works were seriously disregarded. Little was done to improve the port at Beirut, and most major roads were neglected. Furthermore, Ma’oz (1968) points to the corrupt local authorities for slow and shoddy infrastructure development, such as the Beirut-Damascus road which took ten years to build.

The city continued to develop north. As European influence grew more visible in Damascus, the old Christian quarter became a popular residence for international traders and missionaries, inciting many of the wealthier indigenous families to move out to the new suburbs, such as the high-class Salhiye neighbourhood (Hopwood, 1988). These new suburbs were built in what was regarded as ‘modern’ Western style, with many French and Italian architects building Classical and Rococo style buildings on tree-lined streets (Bianca, 2000).

Photos 4 & 5 - Wide tree-lined streets in the Arnus and Maydan suburbs



Source: Author's own

Fortuitously, the agricultural land of Al-Ghouta was available around the old city, enabling out-migration and spared the city from major changes that might have obliterated its complex tapestry from the past. But as the wealthier residents left the old city for the new suburbs, the old city was left inhabited by the poorer population, and the old city was left stigmatised as backward and inferior.

5. Post World-War I Damascus - The French Mandate

After the First World War and the demise of Ottoman rule, the French mandate tried to continue the urban development that had started in the 19th century (Fries, 2000). In Damascus, Aleppo and other large towns, the French drew up master plans - the first of their kind. But as Hopwood (1988) describes, “the French entered as conquerors not as enlightened guests bearing the banner of the League of Nations” (p. 23). The cities were developed ignoring local traditions and needs. The French reinforced the stigma of the old city as French town planners and architects drew up new suburbs with tree-lined streets, avoiding the old city as they considered it a ‘backward place for the indigenous Arabs’. As Fries (1994) outlines, the mandate had one immediate priority: “la domination du territoire” (p. 312).

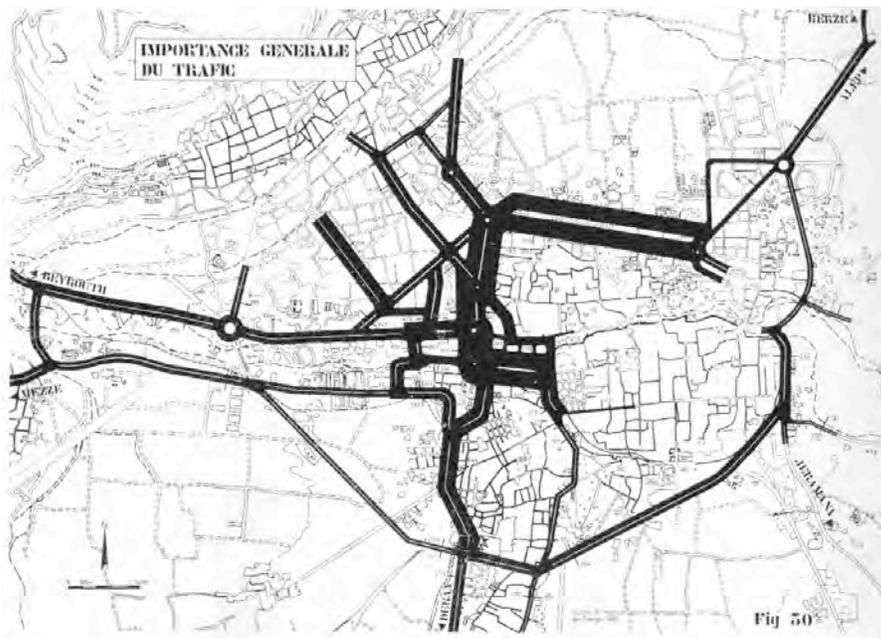
The first master plan for Damascus was prepared in 1935 by a French firm headed by the renowned urbanist Rene Danger who was concerned mostly with questions of hygiene, infrastructure and embellishment of the city. According to Fries (1994), Damascus “appartient au champ d’experimentation de l’urbanism français,” participating in the plan to integrate “l’idée universale de la modernité” (p. 313). Although the urban fabric of Damascus had already undergone profound modifications, inspired by European models during Ottoman rule, the master plan faced resistance from a city which had ‘organically’ developed for the past thousand years.

Furthermore, Ottoman law had stipulated that the municipality was only responsible for new developments, leaving restructuring and/or the improvement of existing infrastructure to the inhabitants. This meant that projects to improve roads and enhance the sewage system were inhibited by the strong bureaucracy left over from Ottoman times. Indeed as Fries (2000) demonstrates, the Ottoman organisation of the municipality hardly changed for the first ten years of French rule with the same recruits and technicians making up the bureaucratic base.

Danger's holistic outlook on cities, led him to carry out an in-depth study of Damascus, taking social, economic, and historical elements into consideration. "Les diverses formes de villes...correspond[ent] a un milieu physiquement, ethnographiquement, socialement et historiquement différent. Toutes ont leur physionomie et leur personnalité propre" (Danger quoted in Fries, 1994, p. 315). In order to maintain a stable socio-economy in Damascus, he adopted the notion of a dichotomy as proposed by Lucien Vilbert from his experience in Morocco: the separation of the old indigenous city and the modern European city. While well intentioned, this reinforced the stigmatisation of the old city as a backward area, sparking off decades of neglect.

As visible from the maps, Danger, working with Michel Ecochard, proposed a radio-centric road system, creating a ring road around the old city to ease the congestion problems in the centre of the city (just west of the old city) and to enable easy access across the town. However, this plan has yet to be put into practise.

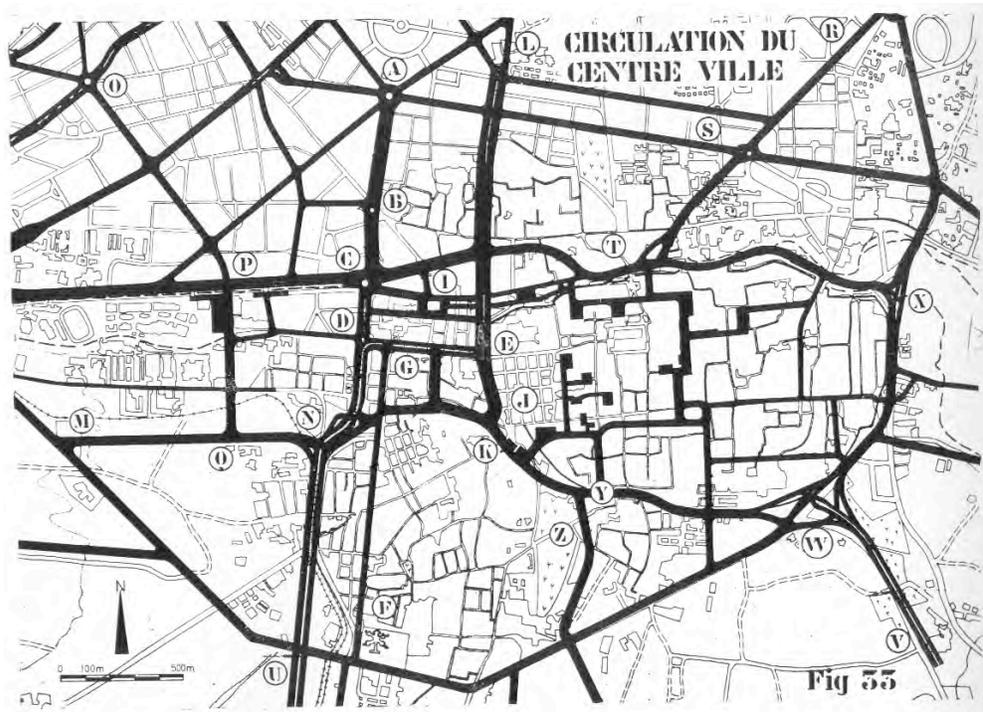
Map 6 - Danger-Ecochard Original Central Road System 1935



Source: Al-Mhanna, S. 2008

As visible, the current road system “looks incomplete...it is almost impossible to get from the east side of the old town to the west without going through the city centre. As you can imagine, traffic problems through the central axis are terrible” (Mhanna, S. 2008).

Map 7 : Danger -Ecochard Planned Central Road System 1935



Source: Al-Mhanna, S. 2008

The planned road system creates a ring road around the old city and the new city. It aims to relieve pressure on the existing central axis by developing main roads throughout the city, making more areas accessible.

In addition, Danger & Ecochard’s framework for urban management was the “morphological-functional zoning of the city” (Kallaa, 1993), as visible in the map below. This plan was adopted in the 1960s and completed in 1994 (Al Mhanna, S. 2008).

With regards to land tenure, the mandate's policies further aggravated the maldistribution of land in Syria by encouraging the growth of private latifundia and facilitating the private appropriation of land to those who collaborated with the mandate. Large areas of land, previously belonging to the Sultan were "sold, leased, or given in the mid-1920s to big landlords and influential persons at low prices" (Keilany, 1980, p.209). A study by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 1952 illustrated the land tenure situation; almost 50% of private land was in holdings of over 100 hectares, with only 13% of land held in smallholdings of 10 hectares or less. In addition, the study showed that approximately 82% of the rural population was either landless or owned small land plots less than 10 hectares (IBRD, 1955).

It was during this era, that the first unauthorised developments began. In 1919, 36% of houses in Damascus were built without a permit - a requirement introduced in the 1858 Ottoman Land Code. Between 1920-1930, the city grew almost 25% - as much as it had done over 50 years previously (Fries, 2000). These problems coincided with growing Arab nationalism, and revolts against what was perceived as an illegitimate rule.²¹ After a large nationalist insurrection in 1925, the issue of urbanism became a central question as the city became "le théâtre des démonstrations nationales...[et] la forme urbaine et le plan de urbanism sont devenus les outils de pouvoir" (Fries, 2000, p. 157). Kallaa (1993) describes how the souk in Sarouja, which was perceived as the headquarters of the resistance movement, was razed in order to destroy the social militant tissue. New boulevards were implanted in its place to transform the area into what was known as 'economic-administration centre', thus the new 'cité-jardin' close to the mandate administration was controllable.

²¹ As mentioned previously, during WWI, the local Arabs had been encouraged to fight the Ottomans by the British, who had promised an independent Arab state. However a secret agreement between the British & the French led to the Arab world being divided up between them and was ratified by the UN. After ten years under the French mandate, a surge of Syrian nationalism began overtaking the call for Pan-Arabism, and called for 'freedom from French rule' (Farsoun, 2002).

In the latter half of the mandate, focus moved away from Danger's holistic view of the city, and a new emphasis on the value of historical monuments was introduced by Michel Ecochard. A new office 'Le Service des Antiquités' became paramount in urban affairs. "The value of monuments became more important than the control or development of the city" (Al-Mhanna, W. 2008). It was at this time [1936-1948] that the Musée de Damas was established by Ecochard. "While this was the first time any serious attention had been paid to the city's long history, other aspects of development were severely neglected - such as the destruction of the oasis' ecological basin" (Al-Mhanna, S. 2008).

6. Independent Syria: the run up to 'Arab Socialism'

Once the French left Syria in 1946, the 'divide and rule' strategy²² they had applied for 25 years left a political domain rife with internal struggle; "Aleppines contested with Damascenes for dominance in commercial and political life; the Druzes pledged allegiance to the Druzes, the Kurds to the Kurds, and tribal peoples to tribal institutions" (US Federal Research Division, 1988, p. 26). And thus, the birth of the Syrian republic was plagued with political instability, with one military coup succeeding another.²³ From 1946 to 1956, Syria had 20 different cabinets and drafted four separate constitutions.

The first comprehensive land reform occurred in 1958 when Syria joined with President Nasser of Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. Under the banner of 'Socialism', the Agrarian Reform Law No. 161 was put into effect, stipulating that no one person was allowed to own more than 80 hectares of irrigated land or 300 hectares of rain-fed land. Approximately 1.37 million hectares of land was to be expropriated and redistributed to landless peasants. A system of full compensation was planned, using bonds to be paid annually by the recipients over forty years (Keilany, 1980). In addition, cooperative membership was compulsory to all those receiving land, and for small land-hold owners, contrasting against the traditionally "highly individualist spirit of the peasants in Syria" (Aziz ah-Ahsan, 1982, p.304).

However, several problems arose limiting the scope and effectiveness of this reform, including a severe three-year drought - reducing Syria's agricultural

²² The French divided Syria up into 5 semi-autonomous "artificial statelets" designated by the concentration of minorities – Lebanon was created as a separate Christian state (Quilliam, 1999, p.33). This "accentuated religious differences and cultivated regional, as opposed to national pan-Arab sentiment" (US Federal Research Division, 1988, p.20).

²³ As well as internal political strife, the creation of Israel in 1948 became the most immediate threat. As Quilliam (1999) describes, Israel posed a double edged challenge: 1 – Israel had the support of the two imperial powers, the US and the Soviet Union, therefore facilitating its establishment in the region at the expense of the Palestinians and the Syrians. 2 – The failure of the Syrian bourgeois elite to prevent the creation of Israel led to conflicts between the radical and conservative Syrian nationalists.

output by over 50% and rural income by 60% (Keilany, 1980). In addition, the reform was universal and did not take into account Syria's and Egypt's agricultural differences - Egypt's agriculture being intensive, while Syria's was extensive. Furthermore, Syria was sparsely populated in the arid East, with high concentrations of inhabitants in the West. This meant that in the West, there was not enough expropriated land to satisfy all the peasants' needs (Petran, 1972). Indeed some villages saw little improvement - for example in Akrab, a village in Hama, 90% of peasants remained landless. In the Ayssam village of Damascus, while 576 hectares were expropriated, to the benefit of 79 families, still 75% of peasants remained landless (Ministry of Agrarian Reform, 1966, p. 166). Furthermore, many of the beneficiary peasants could not keep up with the annual payments nor did they have sufficient resources to cultivate the land. This caused many to hand back their plots of land to the original owners, and resume work as sharecroppers paying a modest rental (Petran, 1972).

Further decrees by President Nasser led to the nationalization of major enterprises, including banks and insurance companies, prohibitive taxes (up to 90% of income for high earners), and strict foreign exchange controls (Aziz, al Ahsan, 1982). After only three years, another coup d'état led to Syria pulling out of the UAR in 1961. Following two more years of political unrest, the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party came to power through a military coup. However, the short-term effects of the rigorous measures undertaken during the UAR, and the political instability that ensued "were detrimental to the Syrian economy, which had a deep-rooted, free-enterprise tradition.... There followed a flight of capital out of Syria" (Aziz al-Ahsan, 1982, p. 305).

Between 1963 and 1970, the Ba'ath party members in control swung from left, to far-left to finally 'liberal' left in 1970 when Alawite²⁴ Hafez Al-Assad became

²⁴Alawites are a minority sect in Syria, traditionally based in the NorthWest. (The French mandate created an Alawi statelet.) Alawi is thought to be a sect of Shi'ite Islam, however, it is practiced in secret, and not much is known about it. (Ayoub Agha, 2008)

President²⁵. Land reform was instated more extensively, reducing the sizes of landholdings and lengthening the time of compensation. However, while land reform was “supposed to create a more equal society, the Ba’ath Party favoured members of their sect; hordes of Alawites from the North flooded Damascus and land was distributed amongst friends and families of the government” (Ayoub Agha, 2008).

However Gambill (2001) points out, that while many scholars claim the Alawites received a disproportionate share in land reforms, the Alawites and other minorities “constitute[d] a greater percentage of the rural population than the [majority urban] Sunnis” (Gambill, 2001).

While the Ba’ath Party ran a predominately statist economy, not all sectors fell under state ownership, and entrepreneurs were encouraged to invest in agricultural and retail sales sectors. Furthermore, the building and construction industry was to be left in the hands of the private sector (Quarterly Economic Review, 1968). Given the “rampant corruption and severity of government controls on imports and exports,...[and] the complete nationalisation of banks and insurance companies, private investors focused mostly on the service sector and real estate as they felt more free [from government control] and therefore [it was felt that these sectors] carried less risk” (Kamha, 2008).

As Aziz al-Ahsan (1984) observes, “by the end of 1978, proliferation of fancy shops, fashionable restaurants, and beauty salons demonstrated that private-sector investments were diverted to economically less-productive activities” (p. 309). These statements are supported by an article published in Al-Safir newspaper in 1981. The article comments on the Syrian private sector, describing how it avoided productive sectors, such as manufacturing, and instead directed its investments into real estate and construction. The article estimated

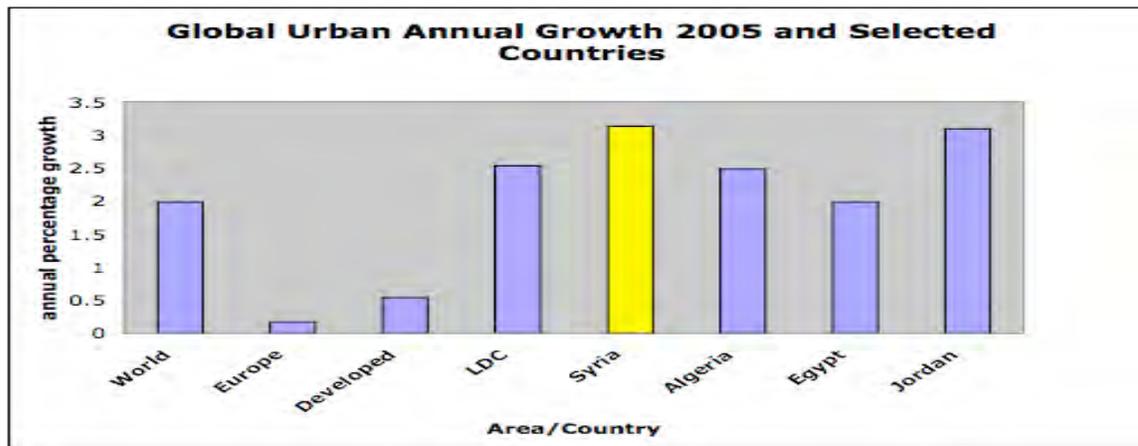
²⁵ Hafez al-Assad had been the Minister of Defence since 1966. He represented a more pragmatic military based ideology, in the face of the dominant radical views of the Ba’ath Party.

that the private sector invested an average of SYP70 million a year in industry compared to SYP1.5 billion in real estate and construction (Al-Safir, 1981).

7. Damascus after Independence: Urban Change & Ecological imbalance

The high rate of real estate and construction developments mentioned in the previous chapter are associated with the rapid urbanization of the major cities in Syria since the 60s. Given the perceived ‘low-risk’ of real estate, land speculation has dominated the economic scene from the 1960s until today. “Traffic in urban land and building for quick speculative profit has become a major economic activity” (Shiloh, 1969, p. 209). According to World Bank Statistics, Syria has one of the highest population growth rates in the world, at 3% per annum due to increased mechanization of agriculture, and growing rural unemployment (El-Laithy & Abu-Ismail, 2005). Furthermore, its urban population growth rate at over 3% per annum is significantly higher than the global average, the Less Developed Country average, and when compared to other Arab states. This figure is matched by the growth rate of illegal settlements (also 3% per annum) (UN HABITAT, 2001).

Graph 1 -Urban Population Growth 2005 Syria and Selected Countries



Data source: United Nations Statistics Division (2008)

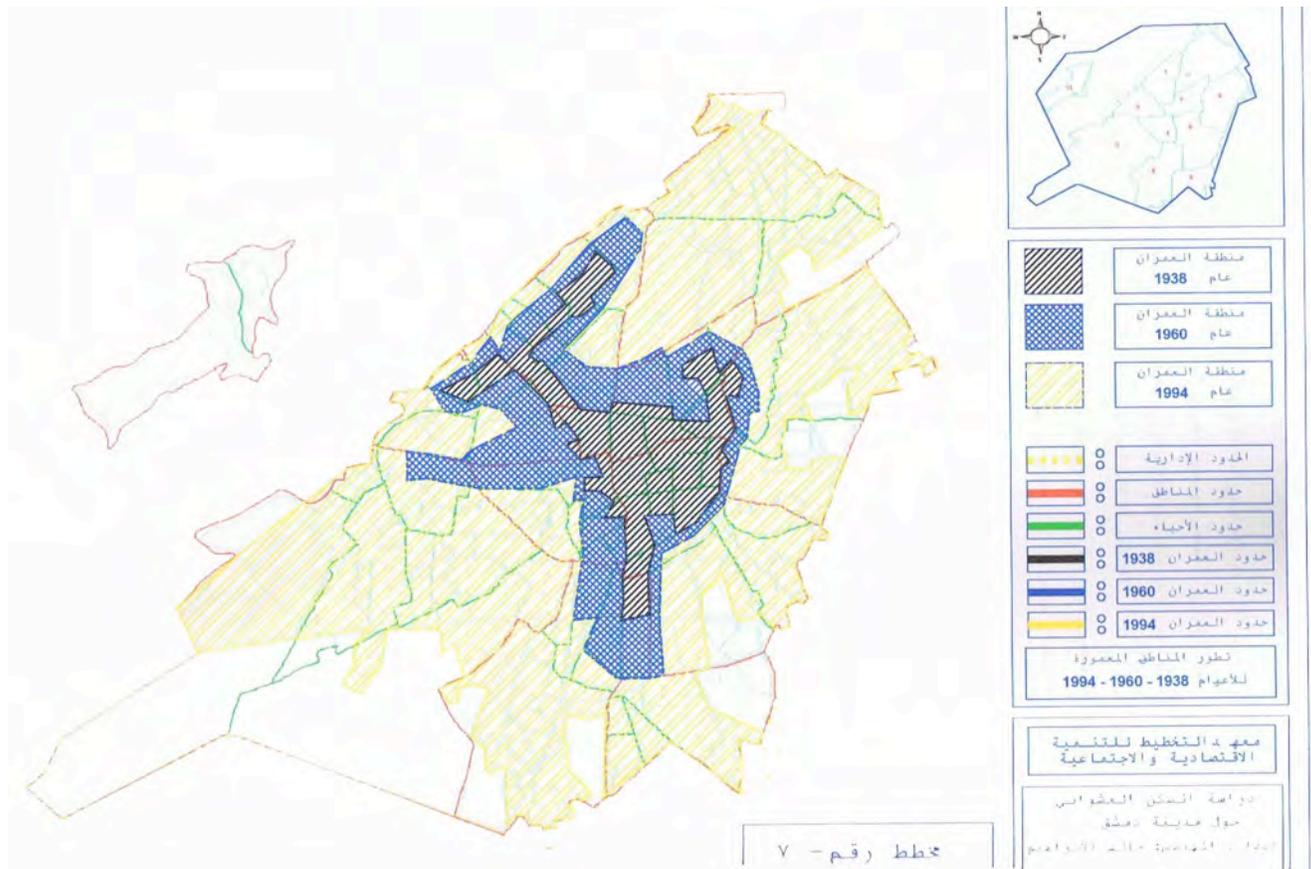
As Atash (2007) states, “In the cities of developing countries, the environmental problems are much greater, because of the overwhelming scale and speed of urbanization. Apart from the effects on health and well being, environmental

degradation constrains development and the growth of cities themselves” (p. 399).

After independence in 1946, Damascus rapidly developed as the state capital, with its population remarkably increasing from 423,000 in 1955 to 3million in 1980. According to Naito (1989) this was due to two major causes: firstly, rural urban migration from all over the country as a result of internal policies for centralization; and secondly, influx of Palestinian and Syrian refugees from Palestine and the Golan Heights. In contrast, immigration to Aleppo, Syria’s second city has been smaller (in terms of population and catchment area) as immigrants tend to come from the rural areas in its vicinity. Ades and Glaeser (1995) argued that high tariffs, high costs of internal trade, and low levels of international trade increase the degree of urban concentration and that political instability and dictatorship determine urban primacy - all factors applied strongly in Syria.

Map 9 below illustrates the vast expansion of the city after 1960 at the expense of the surrounding Ghouta oasis.

Map 9 – The Growth of Damascus, 1938-1994



Source: El- Ibrahim (2001) p.80

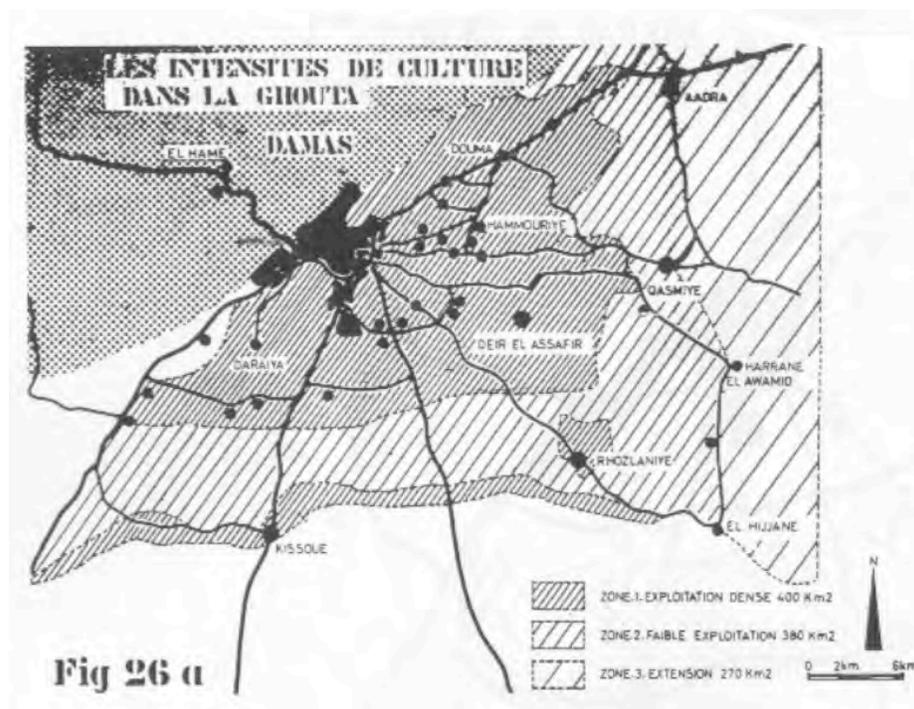
As described earlier, Damascus and its surrounding oasis, Al-Ghouta, have coexisted for millennia. With an annual precipitation of less than 200mm/year, the River Barada has always been a precious source of water for the city. The ecological balance between the city and the oasis sharing the same water resources began facing serious difficulties as the rural population influx flooded Damascus and neighbouring villages.

As Al-Mhanna (S. 2008) explains, “after the land reform, many owners of agricultural land within al-Ghouta were still very poor, and many saw opportunities to sell their plots to the new immigrants.” The newcomers were then able to construct their own houses cheaply, encroaching on the oasis and

destroying the canal networks. This placed unprecedented pressure on the water supply.

In response to the proliferation of such developments, the Prime Ministerial Decree of 1977 prohibited further building of houses in the oasis area. However, this proved more or less ineffective, as the government did not take any measures to restrict the migratory movement, which was the principal cause, thus the growth of ‘illegal settlements’ continued. “Damascus kept on growing, consuming Al-Ghouta until today, where there is almost nothing left of this fertile irrigated land” (Al-Mhanna, S. 2008).

Fig. 5 Exploitation of Al-Ghouta -1945 Ecochard Study



Source: Al-Mhanna, S. (2008)

At the same time, a policy of rapid industrialisation since the 1960s caused more environmental degradation both in the natural flow of the Barada River as well as groundwater. With many industrial areas located along the major canals, the water is directly contaminated by discharge. Furthermore, lax laws on the

importation of cars for private use from the 1980s onwards led to the “terrible state of air pollution in the city...As far as urban environments are concerned, the present stage of urbanisation already exceeds the limits for sound development for the inhabitants” (Naito, 1989, p. 442-443).

8. Contemporary Damascus: Illegal Housing Settlements

According to official land tenure statistics, owner-occupation in Syria represented over 88% of households in Damascus in 2003-2004 – a very high percentage by international standards.²⁶ The private rental market remained very low, averaging just over 7% – although this figure rises to 12% of the urban poor²⁷ (El-Laithy & Abu-Ismaïl, 2005). However, given that private property was encouraged after independence, and has been the long-standing measure of wealth in Syria (Barakat, 1993), the Ba'ath government did not establish a system of social housing. As a result, poor immigrants to Damascus have had to create their own homes informally – remaining 'invisible' to official statisticians and rendering these official statistics unreliable.

Today, illegal housing settlements (or squatter settlements) account for one in three residences in Damascus, and are the main reason for the destruction of Al-Ghouta (Al-Mhanna, S. 2008). On a tour of two of the largest settlements, Taballaa (over 25 hectares) and Nahr el-Aish (approximately 30 hectares) in June 2008, it was clear that these settlements have developed into self-sufficient quarters of the city, with their own basic retail outlets, butchers, grocery shops, laundromats and so on. Furthermore, the settlements provide a range of services to the city as a whole, such as doctors' surgeries, mechanics' garages, hardware stores and electrical repair shops, etc. (see pictures) – none of which appear in the formal economy.

²⁶ In 2003, an average of 73.5% of all households were owner occupied in the EU15. In stark contrast to Syria, many countries of the EU15 have a long established welfare system, reducing the 'necessity' of owner occupation; the state can be relied on for a safety net (EUROSTAT, 2008).

²⁷ The definition of 'poor' is taken from the UNDP study where a poor individual falls below the third decile in the expenditure distribution (El-Laithy & Abu-Ismaïl, 2005).

Photos 6 and 7: The main road through Taballaa



Photo 8 – The Palestinian quarter of Taballaa



Source: Author's own

The average living standard of immigrants in these settlements is “much better than that of urban poor in other third world cities” (Naito, 1989, p. 445). They reside in usually small but clean brick-block houses with several durable electrical appliances, including fridges, CD players, TVs, and satellite dishes (as visible from pictures). As Naito (1989) explains, “certainly they often neglect to acquire legal titles to the land and houses, so they can be classified as spontaneous or squatter settlements, but they are certainly not slums” (p. 445).

Photos 9 & 10: Nahr al-Aish settlements



Inhabitants of these areas tend to work in the service sector as taxi drivers, waiters, garbage collectors, and manual labourers for public works, or government offices. However, employment statistics of the informal sector are not available. Shechter & Yacobi, (2005) state, “Activity in the urban ‘hidden economy,’ which might be as big as the reported one, partially relieves economic

pressures. Informality is not only the experience of the urban poor. Informality, therefore, cannot be considered independently of the formal economy and construction” (p.186). They argue that measures to include illegal/informal settlements/employment in formal analyses should be adopted. “In Middle Eastern cities, the two [sectors – formal and informal] are interrelated in a variety of intimate ways that shape the urban experience. While going counter to the rational-modernist logic of state urban planning, informality is a practical solution, which is more and more accepted by states in attempting to mitigate the current deterioration of services provided to their citizens.”

According to Professor Dr. S. Al-Mhanna from the University of Damascus, “these illegal settlements are Damascus’ major problem. It is so widespread, over 30% of the city’s inhabitants live there, and have been living there for nearly 40 years. The government has allowed this situation too long” (2008). Indeed, according to a “regulatory glitch” (Oxford Business Group, 2006, p.86), Syrian’s have the right to keep their house if it has been built with a concrete roof. As a consequence, Syria has a fast and efficient informal construction sector, with houses built in four days.

Deputy Minister of the Economy, Dr. Ghassan Habash, agrees the situation has been left undealt with for too long:

“We are looking at the cause of these migratory movements; there was, and is still is, a lack of investment, and incentives to invest in rural areas... Such high urban population growth is a problem on many scales, including pollution and overcrowded illegal settlements... Our strategy is to reduce urban population growth by creating and attracting investment outside the main cities.”

The government has planned five ‘industrial cities’ located on the outskirts of main cities for sustainable development, three of which are almost complete, Homs, Aleppo and Adraa. Dier-Ez-Zor and Der’aa are currently still being

planned. Each 'industrial city' will be self-sufficient with plots ready and serviced to build, for a range of industries including, food, textiles and engineering. Plots will also be made available for management and other office buildings. Commercial centres have been planned for supermarkets, restaurants, hotels, banks and hospitals to cater for the residential areas, which have been planned with public parks, green spaces and sports grounds. The industrial city of Homs, is planned to cater for 350,000 inhabitants in 13,500 acres (Homs Chamber of Industry, 2008).

With tax-incentives and possible free-trade zones, the government is hoping these industrial cities will ease the high urban population in Damascus and other major cities and provide much needed employment opportunities across a range of sectors.

Dr. Habash also cited De Soto's "simple advice", recently presented by De Soto to the Syrian government specifically targeting the spontaneous settlements: "by recognising these illegal areas, and providing them with land titles, owners of illegal houses will be able to sell their titles to a company who can redevelop the areas. This way, the squatter population will be empowered, have a role in the market and will have money to buy legal property."

As described by the World Bank (2003): "the registration of property rights in squatter settlements is [...] important in making land and house transactions possible and giving occupants legal protection. It encourages the buying and selling of housing and makes it possible for households to move to a dwelling that suits their needs and their budgets. It also increases the choice of tenure available to households, allowing them to own or rent as they see fit" (p.117).

However, Ayoub Agha, a civil engineer in Damascus, is sceptical this idea will work in Syria. "A similar scheme has been tried before where cheap studio flats were built for the low-income population. Once they were made available, all sorts

of people were queuing up to be registered for the limited number of flats...and then trading of the titles ensued. In the end, the flats became too expensive, and of course the poor people did not benefit at all.”

Ayoub-Agha predicts a similar outcome will occur if De Soto’s advice is followed, “I believe people will go so far as to build new illegal houses, just so that they can get a certificate of ownership...if the government is seriously contemplating this idea, they will need to have a strong managerial base.”

Many studies in the literature critique de Soto’s theory of providing land titles to illegal settlements. Gilbert (2002) uses the city of Bogotá as an example showing that land titles do not necessarily help the poor to get formal finance or credit, nor do they facilitate the sale of houses. He argues instead that land titles do not make much difference other than providing the government with a wider tax base.

Damascene Joukhadar has similar concerns: “only the government will benefit from such housing permits as they will be able to collect tax from more people. This government will do anything to make themselves richer. It is what has made this city so poor” (2008).

This is a major problem faced in Syria as a whole: the role of government.

9. Damascus Today: The role of government & Urban Development

When the new President Bashar al-Assad came to power after the death of his father in 2000, the global political arena had changed: many of the Socialist economies had disappeared, and the Syrian government, “realized [they] had to change [their] economic model in order to remain in the global market...[They] adopted a Social Market economy, which is a market economy emphasizing on social aspects” (Habash, 2008).

Currently facing imminent oil scarcity, the government is now forced to seek other sources of income and diversify the economy. In 2007, income from oil provided 25 percent of the GDP, half of the government’s revenues and about two thirds of its export receipts in 2007 (Raphaeli, 2007). However, according to the US Department of Energy (2008), Syria’s oil output and production is in decline due to technological problems and the depletion of oil reserves. With rising domestic demand, Syria is expected to become a net importer of oil before 2015. Therefore, the government is now looking to “the private sector for investment and development of the country; without oil revenues, we no longer have the financial resources to remain a statist economy” (Habash, 2008).

However, economic reform has been slow. As Waed al-Mhanna, founder of the Heart of Damascus NGO states: “it is not surprising; the Syrian people have been living in a strict dictatorship for forty years and they are just not used to, or experienced in the private sector...On top of that, there is strong resistance to change from within, from a lot of politicians and public servants who have benefited from cronyism and corruption²⁸.”

While the government claim to be changing their ways, many Syrian businesspeople, property developers and other investors remain unconvinced. A

²⁸ In 2007, Syria ranked 138 out of 179 in the Transparency International Index. It has the highest corruption index in the MENA region, except for Iraq. (Transparency International, 2007)

private developer²⁹ described a recent, and not uncommon occurrence: “after purchasing a city centre plot for redevelopment into a modern shopping centre, I was negotiating the planning permission. I was told the Minister of xxxxx³⁰ wanted to speak with me. In the meeting, he had three armed men. He asked for a 50% stake of my business, with his help he said I could have any planning permission I wanted...I walked away, and sold the site to somebody else. They [the politicians] are all gangsters, you cannot trust them” (Anon, 2008).

The abuse of power by some politicians as described above, has not inspired faith for potential private entrepreneurs. However, tackling corruption is one of the government’s main goals. “We recognize this problem, and we are looking at strategies to combat it. But we find ourselves in a catch 22 position” (Habash, 2008).

According to Dr. Habash, the problem stems from the fact that the government employs “too many people”. With such a high population growth, Raphaeli (2008) estimates there are at least 300,000 new entrants into the labour market every year, but job opportunities have not been increasing proportionally. The Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly* estimates that 30 percent of university graduates in Syria are unemployed (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2005).

As a way of combating such high level unemployment, the government has “handed out jobs, even created new ones, to absorb the labour” (Habash). In fact, almost 30% of the labour force works in the public sector³¹ (Øvensen & Sletten, 2007). According to the account of Minister of Finance Dr. al-Hussein, two million Syrians receive wages and pensions from the state (Raphaeli, 2008). “Not only does the government not have enough money to pay decent wages, it has created a thick layer of bureaucracy which impedes reforms and investor confidence”

²⁹ He preferred to remain anonymous.

³⁰ For legal reasons he cannot be named.

³¹ The total average of the labour force working in the public sector is 28%. This figure is notably higher for urban women in the labour force – reaching 70%.

(Habash, 2008). The prevalence of underpaid civil servants has led to a culture of bribery within the system, exacerbating the complex and extensive bureaucracy. The World Economic Forum's 'Most Problematic Factors for Doing Business in Syria', ranks inefficient government bureaucracy first and corruption third³² (World Economic Forum, 2007).

However, without many job opportunities outside the public sector, the government "cannot dismiss employees, as unemployment levels will become unsustainable which may lead to many social and even political disruptions" (Habash, 2008).

In order to stimulate the private sector, the Syrian government has established public-private partnerships for the first time focusing on the real estate and tourism sectors. In addition, a new Ministry of Expatriates has been instituted in an attempt to attract investment from Syrian foreign nationals.

However, property developers in particular are faced with a further problem. As described by Ali Ismail, director of Emaar Syria, the result of the 1970 land reform is a fragmented land holding situation: "obtaining rights to large areas of land for development is practically impossible. Furthermore the only owner of large, undivided plots of land is the military...this produces its own difficulties in acquiring land." However Ismail remains positively hopeful of the situation, "the government knows its downfalls and it wants to improve...We at Emaar have a lot of faith in the development of Syria."

³² 2nd is access to finance.

10. The Risk to Damascus' Heritage

As part of the drive to modernisation, planners have turned their attention to old-city Damascus for redevelopment. With parts of its infrastructure dating back to Roman times, its warren-like streets have led to traffic problems, congestion and pollution. Without the direction of an overriding city development plan, and the underlying problems of corruption, important heritage sites have been badly maintained, and inappropriately renovated. As buildings have fallen into disrepair due to lack of maintenance, city officials have called for them to be knocked down. City mayor, Bishr Sabban, recently described the buildings to be razed as “garbage”, not heritage, with the hope they will be replaced by skyscrapers and motorways – the sign of a modern city of the 21st century (Kabbani, 2008).

Syria was a founding member of UNESCO³³ in 1946. In 1967 the Ancient City of Damascus became a World Heritage Site under the auspices of UNESCO, a site to be protected and preserved in the interest of the international community. As a result, renovation and maintenance of the old city was to be tightly controlled using original materials and suitable building methods. In addition, rules to protect religious sites such as churches and mosques required cafes and bars to be located at least 500 meters from a holy site.

After decades of neglect and stigma of the old town, a concerted effort to reinvent old Damascus began in the late 1980s. “Until the early 1990s a middle-class or upper middle-class Damascene might never have ventured into the Old City of Damascus, a place then associated with peasants and tourists, with the backwardness of the past” (Salamandra, 2004, p.72). The regeneration efforts focused on restaurants and hotels, with many old *dar* houses transformed into grand restaurants, attracting back the urban elite.

³³ UNESCO is the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation aimed at preserving historically and culturally important sites.

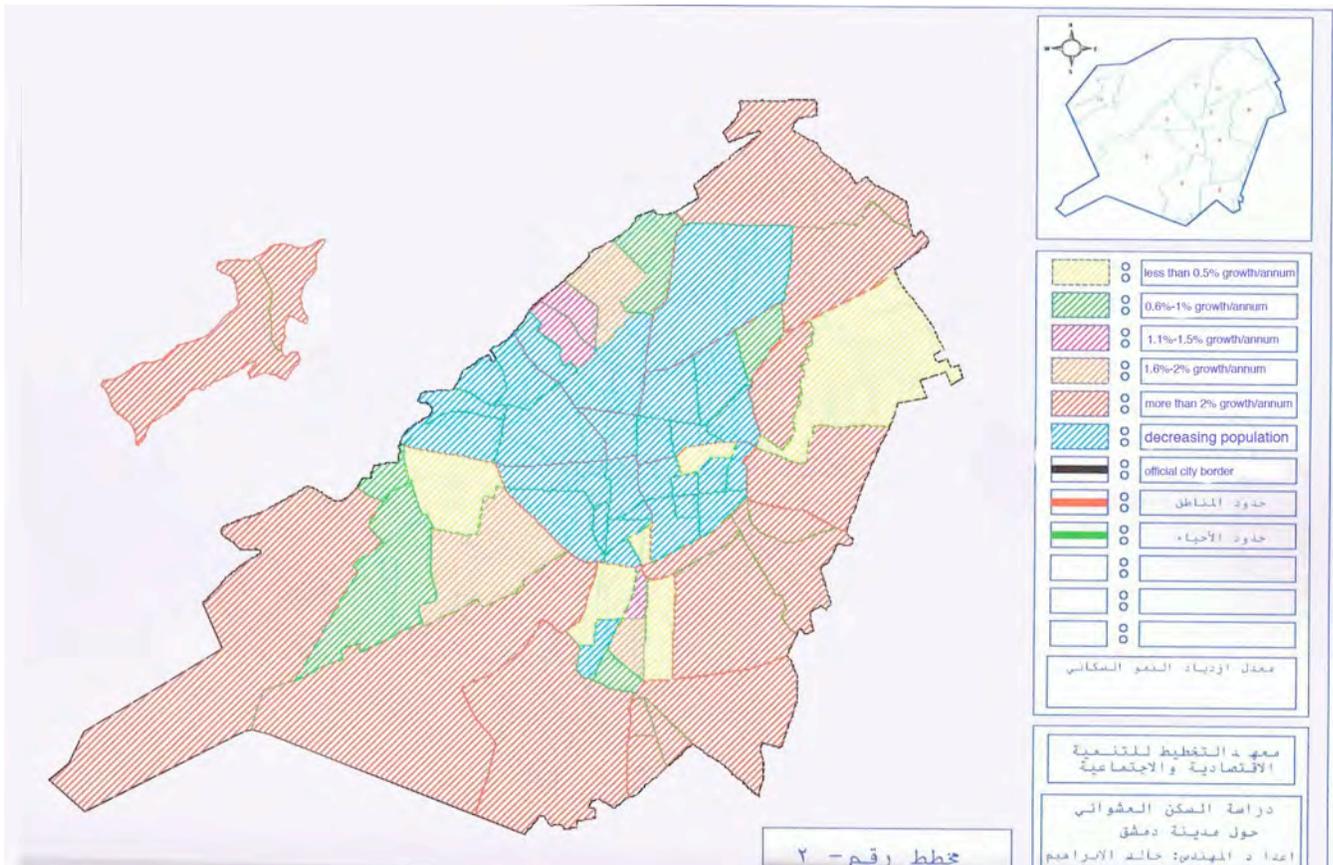
By 1994, the old city had a total of three such restaurants; almost fifteen years later one can now count over 130, with new sites being developed all the time. “They are spreading like a cancer,” exclaims Waed al-Mhanna, consultant to UNESCO’s World Heritage Site and founder of Heart of Damascus NGO. “There is no control. No management of these developments...In order to be able to build a hotel or restaurant, you have to go into partnership with a member of the government or one of their relatives – that way you can build what you want, where you want, how you want.” On a tour around the old city, Waed pointed out Ottoman buildings patched up with concrete blocks, and bars and clubs located opposite churches. “The heritage value of these buildings is destroyed, but the government does not care because it gets rich from these enterprises.”

While heritage activists do not have a problem with making Old Damascus more attractive to tourists and the urban elite, many are concerned with the knock on effect to the typically poor inhabitants. “These [old city] hotels are becoming even more expensive than staying at the Four Seasons³⁴ – the restaurants as well, so rents are going up, house prices are going up, the poor residents who live here cannot afford to live here anymore. The biggest value of Damascus is that it is the oldest *continuously inhabited* city in the world. And now the poor are moving out. The rich will never move in [because of transport/pollution/water problems]. Soon it will only become like a museum. Not lived in. Just for show. What is this? This is not a city!” (Al-Mhanna, W. 2008)

As visible from Map 10 below, the old city and the city centre in general has had negative population growth since 1981, with inhabitants moving to the city periphery where the land is sold cheap and often without a permit.

³⁴ The Four Seasons Hotel is one of three luxury 5 star hotels in Damascus.

Map 10 – Population Growth per Annum, by district in Damascus 1981-2000



Source: El-Ibrahim, 2001 p. 71

Two main concerns of heritage activists in Damascus today are the developments in Medhat Basha St (Straight St) and in King Faisal St shown in Map 11 below.

W. 2008). In response, the government agreed to bring in expert archaeologists and other technical engineers to oversee the work. “But no such expertise was brought in – instead they brought in cheap unskilled labourers with JCBs to bulldoze the street” (Ibid). The street had been lined with Roman columns, all of which were destroyed. “It is a catastrophe! And what is worse, these so-called experts were so unsuitable for the job that now a lake of sewage water has collected underneath the street. It has destroyed all the layers of history” (Ibid). Furthermore, several houses have collapsed as a result of this on-going work.

Photos 11-13 The Destruction of Medhat Basha

11 - The JCB between Ottoman houses



12 - destroyed Roman columns



13 - Destroyed Roman columns



Source: Heart of Damascus.org

The planned developments for King Faisal St have also caused major outrage, and led to UNESCO's threat to withdraw the area's World Heritage status. The project consists of building a motorway in the protected buffer zone of Old Damascus and destroying King Faisal Street, a historically important region which goes along the ancient walls of the city from Bab Al-Salam to Bab Touma. Two thirds of historic houses and many public monuments are located outside the walls. Accordingly the status of World Cultural Heritage site has been given to the entire town (Weber, 2002). However, "the Syrian administration has unfortunately considered only the quarters intra muros as worthy of safeguarding and has enacted laws and set up a council for protection of only these quarters" (Ibid). King Faisal Street dates back to the Ayyoubid (12th-13th century) and Mamelouk eras (13th-16th century) and over 5000 families (inhabitants and traders) will be affected. "This project is going to destroy the world heritage, material and social, the last remainders of active life in the historical Damascus" (Heart of Damascus, 2008).

The solution to such problems "cannot be short term," explains Dr Kamha, an

architect and property developer from Damascus. “We need a body of educated engineers, archaeologists and urban developers to work together with the government. At the moment there is no such dialogue...projects seem to be approved solely on the short term profit potential which in the long run will prove destructive to the whole city of Damascus.”

11. Conclusion

The urban history of Damascus is one of the oldest in the world. Once one of the grandest cities of the Ottoman Empire, today Damascus is the capital of a Less Developed Country suffering from various urban problems. From discussions with key players, including Members of Parliament, property developers and academics, it is clear the main culprit of the city's downfall is due to urban mismanagement and corruption.

In 2005, Al-Utri, Syria's Prime Minister attributed Syria's anaemic economic growth to five major factors: increasing population growth pressures; export-dependency on diminishing oil reserves; low levels of foreign and national investment; growing unemployment; and low level wages and work incentives (Raphaeli, 2007). These factors have also directly affected the urban development of Damascus, creating the wide-scale spread of spontaneous settlements and the destruction to the ecological balance of the oasis.

The pressure to move away from an economy based on raw materials and oil, to one led by the industrial and service sectors has caused problems in itself, inducing the 'modernisation' of the old city of Damascus in a manner that is unsustainable and destructive to its rich heritage.

To mitigate these constraints to its development, the government is claiming to be taking an active stance to improve the situation of a lacking supporting infrastructure and the persistence of traditional administrative methods. Now a signatory of the EU's Barcelona Declaration³⁵, and a beneficiary of the EU

³⁵ The 1995 Barcelona Declaration is part of the Euro-Mediterranean Initiative for peace, stability and security and for sustainable economic development across the region with a view to establish a free trade area. (http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/bd.htm)

National Indicative Program³⁶, Syria is strengthening its ties with Europe with a view to boost its economic position and attract foreign investors.

As clearly stated by Dr Ghassan Habash, the current Deputy Minister of the Economy, the government's biggest priority is to create an investor-friendly environment: "we are aware of our weaknesses and we are undertaking various reforms to improve our situation." While big development companies, such as EMAAR remain hopeful that the investment environment is improving, smaller developers and architects remain sceptical. "As long as we have the same people in power, profiting from certain investments and decisions, we will not see a vast improvement quickly. We need holistic solutions" (Anon, 2008).

Aside from stringent government reforms to combat corruption, long-term, educated strategies need to be adopted to ensure the safeguard of the city's historical wealth. The promotion of new industrial cities outside traditional urban areas, will help the problems associated with high urban populations, and should reduce the pressure on the fragile ecological basin of Damascus.

"The city of Damascus has a high potential to be great again, the most important thing is that we march into the future bravely without destroying our history" (Al-Mhanna, W. 2008).

³⁶ The 2007-2010 National Indicative Program allocates €130 million to support Syria's political, economic and social reform. (http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi_csp_nip_syria_en.pdf)

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