

# Online/offline preservationists

## The material engagement in Syrian cultural heritage between Facebook and offline life

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**Abstract.** This article follows the activities of a group of Syrian preservationists, that take place both in Facebook and offline. The virtual dimension of social media doesn't entail the abandonment of the offline dimension of their activism. The latter often involves a struggle against the material changes of structures and the risks the use of forbidden materials (mainly concrete) entails in the heritage sites. The destructions provoked by the current war add to the causes that led Unesco to list the Damascus *medina* among the heritage sites at risk. The debate about safeguard and transformation of heritage shows the influential role of civil society in Syria and the existence of an area of criticism, admitted by the regime, though in a non-democratic Middle Eastern country.

**Keywords.** Offline/online activism; cultural heritage; Syria; public critique.

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### Introduction

This article is an ethnographic account from a context located both in the ancient *medina* of Damascus, Syria, and in the social space created by Facebook interrelationships of some people living there. A contest takes place there between heritage protection (often based on a static conception of heritage and building traditions that convey an idea of safeguard as museification of difference) and the transformation of ancient neighbourhoods. Against the idea of a neat distinction between real and virtual, such contest takes place both offline and online. The social actors I introduce are a group of friends both in Facebook<sup>1</sup> and in their offline interrelationships.<sup>2</sup> During my fieldwork in Syria, I was introduced to one by another. They had in common the frequentation of places of cultural interest linked to the heritage of Damascus and shared a high level of education, an

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<sup>1</sup> On the primary function of social media as places aimed at making friendships or confirming and consolidating existing ones, cf. Boyd and Ellison 2007. On the public / semi-public / private dimension of friendships, between offline and online spaces, in a Middle Eastern context, cf. Costa 2016. Miller [2016] in this regard has developed the concept of 'scalable sociality'.

<sup>2</sup> Miller shows that the distinctions between the virtual and the real worlds, the online and offline have to be reconsidered: «the online is just as real as the offline. Social media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate. In the same way no one today would regard a telephone conversation as taking place in a separate world from 'real life'» [Miller 2016, 7].

international university education, participation in activities for the protection and development of heritage, the habit of traveling and living in different countries, learning about other cultures and speaking other languages, being willing to adopt different identities and nationalities. None of them were forced to flee Syria, having suffered relatively less from the consequences of the war than the millions of Syrian refugees, IDPs, asylum seekers. Here I talk about one of their online / offline activities - the preservation of heritage -, but in the field research I followed them in many of their activities, according to a multi-sited approach [Marcus 1995].<sup>3</sup> I myself joined this group of friends and on some occasions was the point of contact between these preservationists and some people who had an interest in approaching the group [Copertino 2014]. Ties of friendship and collaboration developed with some of them that went beyond the limits of field research (for instance Arch. al-Berry joined me in Italy to participate in a Master's program to which I had invited him and later we spent time collecting information on the rules relating to political asylum in Italy and other European countries).

They are part of Syrian civil society<sup>4</sup> engaged in heritage policies, to which they often cooperate with the country's institutions, guiding their decisions. For instance the activism of the *Asdiqa Dimashq* (Friends of Damascus) association led the authorities of the capital's governorate to set up a public corporation in charge of watching building and restoring works in the ancient *medina*, the Directorate of the old city (*Mudiriyya al-Medina al-Qadima*), commonly known as Maktab 'Anbar from the Ottoman building hosting it. Furthermore, some of these preservationists are members of Icomos (International Council of Monuments and Sites). The shift from their offline to online activities seems straight-line to me. Whereas their offline friendship was focused around the specific interests of heritage protection, on Facebook it spans all the issues they share with the audience of all other Facebook friends. The number of the latter varies from a few dozens (al-Berry) to many hundreds (Mustafa Ali); the latter's posts often have hundreds of comments. Their offline activity extends to Facebook, which they use to communicate their heritage-related professional experiences,<sup>5</sup> unlike those subjects who develop through social media mainly a bond with heritage, which they previously ignored.<sup>6</sup> Their experience also differs from that of people who produce an 'heritagization from below' [Robertson 2012]: the latter, not being specialists, produce a discourse that differs from the authorized heritage discourse [Svensson 2018] and is characterized by the emphasis on the emotional

<sup>3</sup> On people's «manifold roles in the context of multiple relationships» via social media cf Sinanan [2017, 58].

<sup>4</sup> The concept of civil society spread to the Middle East in the 1990s following the fall of the Berlin Wall and it brought with itself a specific understanding of the role of society in a neoliberal global order. The classical opposition between State and civil society [Hefner 2005; Keane 1988; Seligman 1992; Kaldor 2003], often given for granted in social sciences, in fact had already been surpassed by Gramsci, according to which the State and civil society do not represent two universes that are always circumscribed and separate, but rather a tangle of intertwined power relations [Crehan 2002].

<sup>5</sup> In this sense, this Syrian civil society differs from the groups mentioned by Coleman [2010], for which online existence represents the only possibility of existence, or at least constitutes a radical change in the practices of sociality. On social media as one of the tools through which social visibility is achieved and consequently identities are redefined in social and subjective terms, cf. Sinanan 2017; contrary to what the latter claims regarding Facebook users in Trinidad, my interlocutors do not consider their social visibility (both online and offline) as a way to exist in society. On the way social media help users articulate their social networks and make them visible cf. Miller *et alii* 2016. As Miller [2011] noted, Facebook doesn't invent social networking but it certainly facilitates and expands it.

<sup>6</sup> Svensson [2018] terms this dynamic 'Heritage 2.0'.

bond with heritage.<sup>7</sup> The case-study I'm introducing, however, shows that the authorized heritage discourse itself is not monolithic, but has internal differences, contradictions, different points of view through which preservationists negotiate their mutual positioning in the arena of heritage policies.

In the field of cultural heritage, debate and public criticism are conceivable in Syria, both offline and online. The debate on heritage in Syria represents an area in which criticism is allowed, a public sphere that consists both in an accepted space of digital democracy and mobilization [Postill in Horst & Miller 2012, 166-168],<sup>8</sup> and in offline public activity. This area of public criticism exists even within a broader context in which criticism of the legitimacy of power is not tolerated,<sup>9</sup> as demonstrated by the violent repression of protests, starting in 2011, which included the censorship of blogs and Youtube channels documenting the clashes [Reuters 2013; Lynch, Freelon & Aday 2014; O'Callaghan *et alii* 2014; SEO & Ebrahim 2016].

The article is based on fieldwork research I carried out through a two-year stay in Syria, several shorter stays and, more recently, online media (email and Facebook). The tools made available by netnography [Cova, Kozinets & Shankar 2007; Kozinets 2010, 2015] were useful above all because, while in the period of my offline fieldwork the political situation in Syria was quite stable, the outbreak of the war and subsequently the Covid-19 pandemic made it extremely difficult and dangerous to physically go to the field. Yet even the ethnographic study of (and through) social media presents some difficulties in Syria, precisely because of the censorship imposed by the regime on the network.

In particular email services, social media, streaming video, websites for human rights organizations and Islamist opposition groups, critical press, independent bloggers are commonly censored by the Syrian regime. Internet use is controlled in various ways: criminalization of those who post contents questioning the regime's legitimacy [ElGohary 2010; Alabaster 2016], the State monopoly of the telecommunications industry, filtering of internet content [Owens 2007], monitoring of internet use.<sup>10</sup> The users of internet cafés must sign in by providing their national identification number. Even just asking questions about these topics, as I saw during my offline fieldwork, can arouse suspicion from the security services [Copertino 2018]. Furthermore, due to the restrictions and obsolescence of web infrastructures, the use of the internet is very limited and in particular only one million Syrians (less than 6%) have a Facebook account [Tkacheva *et alii* 2013]. This social medium was blocked until February 2011; today a good part of Facebook users is made up of social activists.

I start dealing with the destructions due to the current civil war and terrorist attacks. Such destructions were very few in the ancient *medina* of Damascus and yet Unesco – that in 1953 [Collart, Abul-Hak & Dillon 1954] had started the process that led to list the ancient

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<sup>7</sup> On the emotional bond with the heritage see Cunningham Bissell 2005; for this issue in particular in Middle Eastern contexts, cf. Maffi & Daher 2014, Volait 2014. According to Svensson, «social media [...] can [...] transmit affect [...] to artifacts [and] enable and strengthen people's affective engagement with heritage» and create an «affective heritage community» [2018, 275-276].

<sup>8</sup> Della Ratta [2018], however, excludes that the wealth of networks in Syria created a new public sphere.

<sup>9</sup> On the internet censorship in Syria cf. Della Ratta [2018]. On the role of media activists in the riots in Syria cf. Tkacheva *et alii* [2013].

<sup>10</sup> These tools are also used to counter the expansion of ISIS in Syria [Gunaratna 2016].

districts of Damascus in the World heritage in 1979 [Chastel, Millon & Taralon 1979] –<sup>11</sup> recently has listed it among the heritage sites in danger.

Yet the discourse of heritage at risk pre-dates the war and focuses on the damage caused by the use of concrete involved by the gentrification of the central districts of the Syrian capital<sup>12</sup> and by the building practices of people living in the *medina* though not sharing the discourse of patrimonialization [Maffi & Daher 2014; Singerman & Amar 2006] ('the old residents', in the heritage authorities' words).

The current danger due to the war adds to these risks. During the current war, archeologic sites such as the Citadel of Aleppo and the Crak des Chevaliers have been used as fortresses. Both the regular army and the Free Syrian Army and later ISIS have occupied some monuments and placed pipers there, to shoot towards the nearby urban districts. Therefore, monuments become battlefields and targets of mutual attacks. This happens although Syria has signed the main international regulations concerning the protection of cultural heritage in case of war.<sup>13</sup>

## Heritage in danger

The socio-political revolt that started in Syria in 2011 on the wake of Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, from July 2012 turned into a bloody conflict between the regime and the opposition. Since the beginning of the war, buildings and movable objects that constitute part of the cultural heritage have been severely damaged [Cheikhmous 2013]. Arch. Luna Rajab, a leading woman in the civil society concerned with heritage, that I was introduced to by Arch. Al-Berry during my offline fieldwork and later became Facebook friends with, has been concerned in denouncing and trying to understand the reasons for the destruction of the material cultural heritage in Syria during the war. On July 3, 2021 she posted on her Facebook profile a video shot during a conference she attended about Integrated Reconstruction of Heritage in the Post Trauma of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, held by the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage, where she spoke about Cultural Heritage: A Gateway to Exit the Syrian Crisis. Speaking about the destructions in Aleppo and elsewhere, she said:

The sabotage targeted historical symbols and cultural heritage in order to destroy the national identity and sense of belonging. It is also a sabotage of the human soul because of the discrimination that it spreads in an attempt to make the people of the same country fear from

<sup>11</sup> Of course concern for the ancient *medina* is pervasive, and dates back at least to the 1930s, when the French mandatory administration started to protect the ancient districts of Syrian cities. From the very beginning of the mandate, the League of Nations charged the French administration with the task to develop shortly a law to protect the ancient buildings and monuments [Mandat de la SDN pour la Syrie et le Liban 1922].

<sup>12</sup> Starting from the 1990s, several factors had made possible major works of renovation of the built environment: the concentration in the city of Damascus of important branches of the service sector and of the state bureaucratic apparatus; the gradual economic liberalization and the significant events related to it, such as the growth of private banks and credit institutions; the development of the tourist, communication and construction industries.

<sup>13</sup> IV Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its Annex: Regulation concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, Oct. 18, 1907, 187 C.T.S. 227; Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention 1954, May 14, 1954, 249 U.N.T.S. 240; UNESCO Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage, Oct. 17, 2003.

each other. [...] The first thing ISIS did in 2013 when they entered Deir Ezzor was bombing the suspended bridge which connected the two banks of the Euphrates river together [...]. The militants and ISIS, under the slogan of blowing up the pagan monuments, targeted the city of Palmyra with the antiquities of the city dating back to Roman era; they detonated its Arch of Victory and the Temple of Baal, claiming that they are seeking to raise the banner of Islam. But what they were aiming at was systematically sabotaging the cultural heritage and national identity. Otherwise how can they justify their deliberate bombing of the minaret of the Umayyad mosque of Aleppo and burning it? And why they demolished the Islamic religious buildings and mosques?<sup>14</sup>

The regime and the rebels have been charging each other with looting and destruction of heritage goods, as part of mutual propaganda. The destruction of cultural heritage, indeed, is to some extent a means of the fundamentalist opposition to the regime, since the safeguard of heritage is part of the strategies of self-legitimation of the political power [Maffi & Daher 2014; Turku 2017]. The Syrian regime indeed proved to be part of the modern civilized ruling parties by carrying out the policies of heritage protection that began during the French mandate (1920-1946) and were implemented after independence. The Syrian Antiquity Law itself provides the legal means to prevent the destructions of cultural goods. Therefore the latter are part of the general breakdown of the rule of law in Syria.

Starting from the crucial event of the destruction of Bamiyan Buddha statues (2001), the Middle East has been plagued by similar acts, which led some to speak of a Bamiyanisation [Lostal 2015] of the region.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in Damascus only 31 ancient buildings have been slightly damaged, as one interactive map provided by the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums (GDAMS) shows.<sup>16</sup> The old city has been protected from the destructions, car bombs and firefights that have hit other central neighbourhoods outside the ancient walls and the peripheral districts of the capital city,<sup>17</sup> and yet Damascus old city appears among the 54 sites of the Unesco List of World Heritage in Danger.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, although several Unesco decisions, from the beginning of the war, kept the old

<sup>14</sup> Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage, Integrated Reconstruction of Heritage in the Post Trauma of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, 20 June 2021, available at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0kAuySuRSM&fbclid=IwAR2aJwscsNywMP1v\\_kTcRNzne8Plg6BqeVyTDQOFdmwfbkZ-bi-C\\_RBd4Y4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0kAuySuRSM&fbclid=IwAR2aJwscsNywMP1v_kTcRNzne8Plg6BqeVyTDQOFdmwfbkZ-bi-C_RBd4Y4)

(last accessed 30 October 2021).

<sup>15</sup> The attacks to the cultural heritage are partly due to ethnic-religious causes; that's the case, for instance, of the destruction of Yonis tomb in Mosul [Euronews 2014] and of marabouts shrines in Tunisia and Lybia. Something similar happened in Syria too [Quntar 2013, 351].

<sup>16</sup> General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, Interactive map of Damascus Ancient City, available at <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?m=337> (last accessed 16 October 2021). The Directorate is an institution controlled by the regime, thus it's partisan. Common citizens and would-be journalists have witnessed further destructions issuing pictures and video on the web, yet the international community questions the reliability of such sources. Further, Unesco can't deal with the opposition, since its statute acknowledges only the governments as partners.

<sup>17</sup> American Association for the Advancement of Science, Syria's World Heritage Sites, available at <https://www.aaas.org/resources/ancient-history-modern-destruction-assessing-current-status-syria-s-world-heritage-sites>. <https://www.aaas.org/resources/ancient-history-modern-destruction-assessing-status-syria-s-tentative-world-heritage-sites-7#dura-europos> (last accessed 16 October 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Unesco, List of World Heritage in Danger, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/> (last accessed 1 November 2021).

city in the WHL, there's a risk of it losing its outstanding cultural value that makes it part of the List.<sup>19</sup>

As I'll show, Syrians perceive their cultural heritage as something living, usable and changeable. The ancient cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, etcetera are living entities, where the built environment is inhabited, transformed, bought and sold, restored, rebuilt. Syrians perceive the destructions as attacks to their cultural identity, although they count them as less grievous than the death of thousands and the dispersion of millions of people. As Arch Rajab stated in a video she posted on Facebook,<sup>20</sup> speaking about Sketch for Syria, an initiative she directed in collaboration with the University of Venice, aimed at collecting ideas and projects for the post-war reconstruction of the country,

People are related to their heritage. These are young architects and young professionals, inside Syria and outside Syria [...]. The results was the best evidence of the attachment of Syrians with their heritage and witnessing that the way out of identity destabilization is through restoration and rehabilitation of this heritage. It was clear within this initiative the Syrians' attachment to their national cultural heritage from the 45% of the drawings contained in the returned sketchbooks whose explicitly issue referred to cultural heritage. This indicates the extent to which the Syrian is attached to history, especially in the scientific and cultural community.<sup>21</sup>

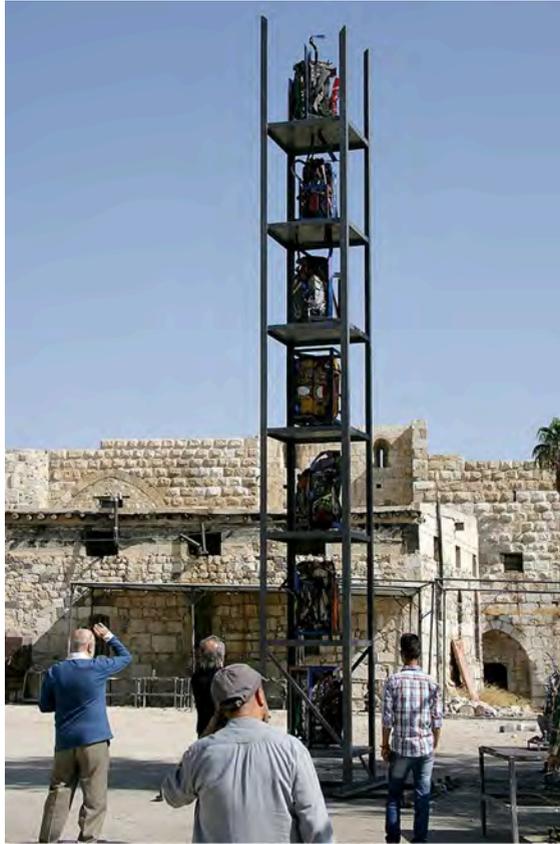
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<sup>19</sup> Unesco, Ancient City of Damascus, available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/20/documents>. <http://apsa2011.com/apsanew/damascus-the-citadel-and-the-great-umayyad-mosque/> (last accessed 1 November 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Luna Rajab, Facebook, July 3, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/luna.rajab>.

<sup>21</sup> Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage, Integrated Reconstruction of Heritage in the Post Trauma of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, 20 June 2021, available at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0kAuySuRSM&fbclid=IwAR2aJwscsNywMP1v\\_kTcRNzne8Plg6BqeVyTDQOFdmwfbkZ-bi-\\_C\\_RBd4Y4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0kAuySuRSM&fbclid=IwAR2aJwscsNywMP1v_kTcRNzne8Plg6BqeVyTDQOFdmwfbkZ-bi-_C_RBd4Y4) (last accessed 30 October 2021).



**Img.1. Tower of War Debris, a sculpture by Mustafa Ali, made using rubble and pieces of objects destroyed during the civil war (<https://www.facebook.com/gallery.mustafali>).**

The destructions of the war are the subject of some works of a Syrian artist, Mustafa Ali. He is a Syrian sculptor and cultural activist, originally from Latakia but residing and active in the *medina* of Damascus. I met him in 2004, through Arch. al-Berry, who was a regular visitor to the cultural initiatives promoted by Ali. I later became Ali's friend and follower on Facebook, through which I have followed his activities in recent years. Among these activities, in October 2017 there was the production of some sculptures made using rubble and pieces of objects destroyed due to the bombings of the Syrian civil war. Among these works, the *Tower of War Debris* (*borj min bqaya al-harb*) stood out, a sculpture composed of a metal parallelepiped structure, about ten meters high, filled with rubbles from Syrian houses, which was exhibited in the Castle of Damascus [img. 1]. The tower was made through metal pressing technique; it was divided into 7 layers resembling 7 years of war. As Ali stated, «the idea of canning intended to express pain and sadness inside every man, meanwhile there are several outlets in an indication to the human's inner strength, steadfastness and ability to overcome his pain» [Sana News 2017]. The event met with some success: it was broadcast on satellite television, in the *Scent of art* (*'atr al-fan*) program and the publication of the photos of the exhibition obtained hundreds of likes and comments. For instance Abo Ali, a Syrian engineer and follower of Ali, commented: «Syria is the factory of great people in times of war and peace. Mustafa with

your head up high you pull us all up».<sup>22</sup> Another follower, Ibrahim Muhammad Alhasan, employed at the Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources, commented: «All the pride and glory to an artist who resisted in his country and gave his effort and his art to Syria despite all the circumstances. All the love for the great Mustafa Ali».<sup>23</sup>

## Transforming heritage

Mustafa Ali is among those who understand the heritage space as a living entity, which changes over time and can be transformed by those who live there. Besides being a sculptor, Ali is the leading figure of a group of Syrian artists that, starting from the 2000s, concentrated their activities in Damascus *medina*, in the so-called Jewish Quarter (*Harat al-Yahoud*), named after the former presence of Syrian Jews until the foundation of Israel in 1948 and the following Arab-Israeli wars. The Mustafa Ali Art Foundation is based in a large Arab house (*beit 'arabi*, as the large courtyard buildings found in Syrian *medinas* are commonly referred to) in the Jewish Quarter. This venue is the center of numerous activities - exhibitions, concerts, conferences, local and international workshops, institutional meetings, some of which I participated in during my offline fieldwork - involving many other Syrian artists, some of whom have transferred their activities to the same neighborhood, buying abandoned houses and premises and transforming them into studios, ateliers and art galleries. Several works on the built environment (restoration, redevelopment of neighborhoods, installation of plaques, posters advertising artistic events, production of district maps distributed to visitors) have transformed the appearance of the neighborhood, which in the local toponymy has changed its name and is defined by many 'The Artists' quarter' (*Harat al-Funnun*). Facebook certifies this change: in some posts the Foundation's address is indicated as the Artists' street. This is also due to the fact that Jews no longer reside in the neighborhood and in the 2000s this area was perceived by preservationists as an abandoned and degraded neighborhood. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the abandoned houses were occupied by Palestinians from the diaspora and displaced people from Golan, and the city administration condoned the status quo. The larger houses were transformed into condominiums, and different families adapted to the different spaces in which the houses were divided, and at the same time they adapted the space to their needs: new rooms were built in the courtyards, some *iwān*<sup>24</sup> were closed and used for housing. From the preservationists' point of view, therefore, Harat al-Yahoud is a neighborhood to be restored and enhanced.

The artists led by Mustafa Ali perceive themselves - and are perceived by other preservationists - as the main actors in the safeguarding and enhancement of material heritage. The restoration of their *buyout 'Arabeen* (plural of *beit 'Arabi*) and the redevelopment of the neighborhoods is an integral part of their artistic and cultural project. It is also a political project, since their activity is acknowledged by local, but also national and international authorities, as evidenced by the consensus that Ali collects both in political circles close to the establishment and among international political figures. For example, in July 2008 he exhibited some works at the Center Pompidou in Paris. The inauguration

<sup>22</sup> Mustafa Ali, Facebook, October 16, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/gallery.mustafali>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Iwān* is the vault space which occupies the southern side of a Damascene house and overlooks the courtyard.

was attended by the Syrian First Lady, Asma al-Asad and various French institutional figures, including the then Minister of Culture and Communication, Christine Albanel. The photos of the event were posted by Ali in his FB profile.



**Img. 2. The ‘Street Art Symposium’, an initiative of Mustafa Ali Art Foundation held in Damascus in December 2020 (<https://www.facebook.com/gallery.mustafali>).**

The acknowledgement of the artists of Mustafa Ali's circle as stakeholders of heritage development also arouses disputes, as evidenced by the controversy raised by an initiative of the Foundation in December 2020, and expressed by some ‘dislikes’ on Facebook. The event was called ‘Street Art Symposium’ (*Multaqa fan at-tariq*) and involved sculptors, painters, calligraphers, carvers, muralists, who performed their works in the streets of the Al-Tayaminah neighborhood, near the walls of the *medina* [img. 2]. The streets themselves became part of the works of art, especially by calligraphers and muralists [img. 3]. Mustafa Ali explained that «we believe in the role of art in change [...]. We all hope to build our future. Art is a project and a civilizational message»<sup>25</sup> and linked the transformations in the appearance of the old neighborhoods to a desirable historical change that would bring Syria out of the serious crisis in which it found itself, still at the end of 2020. Many comments on his post got the point and confirmed this aspect. For instance Mahi ad-Din Katem, a photographer who had documented the event commented on it like this: «[...]Magic souls [...] colored the soul before coloring the picture, the stone, the walls, carrying civilization, art and beauty in tired alleys. Let creativity shine in their memories and they will remain light in this dusty time. Blessed are your efforts, artists, sculptors, everyone who gave a word for the success of this event, which shines in a more beautiful year»;<sup>26</sup> a Syrian artist, whose Facebook profile had the pseudonym Samu Tartous and featured images of the city of Tartous and President Asad, commented: «Thank you for your efforts, Mr. Mustafa. All the activists remember that there is still life in the country

<sup>25</sup> Mustafa Ali, Facebook, December 31, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/gallery.mustafali>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

[...]»;<sup>27</sup> Sana Zghaiby, an Arabic and English teacher, commented: «A wonderful initiative. The country has been in a state of stalemate since the days of the first war. We forgot the joy. We forgot the colors. We forgot the sweet clichés [...]»;<sup>28</sup> Ethan Sultan, a Syrian writer, wrote: «Good luck Syria. The pain is painted together with the hope of Syria. All the paintings are a cry of pain for a sad reality».<sup>29</sup>



**Img. 3 Calligraphers and muralists performing their works during the ‘Street Art Symposium’ (<https://www.facebook.com/gallery.mustafali>).**

Those who criticized the initiative, on the contrary, seemed to share an idea of heritage protection intended as the conservation of ancient urban forms in their original state and deplored the alterations in the appearance of ancient buildings. Hanaa Aboassaf, a philosophy teacher living in the nearby Jaramana neighborhood, commented sarcastically: «Can you imagine the walls of your ancient Damascene studio inside and out, scribbled with pictures and colors [...]. The old Damascene walls are very cool now»;<sup>30</sup> Ema Abo Al-Joud, a Damascene photographer living in Germany, wrote: «By God, Lord, do you see what you made the name of art? !!!! And the name of modification and beautification of the neighborhoods of Sham [the affective name of Damascus, author’s note]? !!! [...]»;<sup>31</sup> Racha Kayali, a Syrian architect, commented: «[...] The initiative is beautiful, but painting on the walls of a city like Damascus, by non-specialists, is a mistake. Admitting a mistake is a virtue. Continue the initiative on canvas, and erase the traces of this random ‘art’»;<sup>32</sup> this idea was stressed by Nasan Esber, a painter, who wrote: «People paint on the walls of factories, locomotives, auto, roads, not on traditional walls. You distorted what was not distorted by the country».<sup>33</sup> An art printer, Adam Marouf, was particularly violent in his comments; for instance he wrote: «Unfortunately, a blighted visual distortion

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem.*

expresses a frivolous thinking, may God curse you, you distort Damascus, take off». <sup>34</sup> Bahram Hajou, a painter with training in Germany who had attended the Symposium, replied wryly: «Nice one Adam. Personally, I love to do all my artwork for every child and artist from my country, which I cherish without discrimination»; <sup>35</sup> Marouf in turn replied by alluding to Mustafa Ali's closeness to the Syrian establishment: «He who seems to be flattering, is a person who promotes a deadly regime. This is the goal of the event. If they are really serious, to plant smiles on the faces of children, [...] it is better for them and it is more beneficial to buy shoes for children who live in these simple homes to protect them from the cold, or something with no diesel [indeed many houses of the ancient city are heated with oil stoves, author's note] to keep warm [...] your need is a philosophy [...]». <sup>36</sup>

The animosity of the discussion led the public administration to intervene, claiming the correctness of its decision to support the initiative. Nehal Kallash, architect and project manager from the governorate of Damascus, joined the discussion commenting:

A clarification. Some social media sites and pages reported news about the launch of the Street Art Symposium activities in the Tayaminah neighborhood of Old Damascus. The governorate of Damascus clarifies that the Street Art Symposium is part of a volunteer cultural and artistic series carried out by the Mustafa Ali Gallery in the open air, which [...] met with popular approval and popularity, and the choice of Al-Tayaminah neighborhood in Bab Al-Musalla area came in consultation with the neighborhood committee, which expressed its welcome and cooperation. Note that Al-Tayaminah neighborhood is outside the UNESCO-registered old city of Damascus and is not archaeological, and the square in which the event was held is not archaeological or historical, but rather a popular area and the walls are not antique, consisting of walls made of mud and some of them from blocks and cement. This event consists mainly in carving on wood and drawing on paintings. As for painting on the walls, it does not exceed 10% of the activities, and the people of the neighborhood, including the church goers and Father Fadi Al-Homsi (the pastor of the church) participated in it. <sup>37</sup>

Among the arguments raised by Architect Kallash to undermine the accusation of altering the heritage, were the fact that the neighborhood, although ancient, lies outside the perimeter of the *medina*, and that the buildings in the neighborhood were made of materials of poor quality, such as concrete. The institutional statement, whose vantage point was close to the authorized heritage discourse, however didn't put an end to the critics. Jamil Farah, a Damascene artist living in Paris, wrote: «Nehal Kallash, the Damascus governorate is the same one that still owns real estate in old Damascus within the UNESCO World Heritage area? Who are the experts in the province who decided what is archaeological and what is not?»; <sup>38</sup> a painter, Nasan Esber, claiming the primacy of the emotional bond with heritage over authorized heritage discourse, added: «Every ancient building is an antique building, whether or not it is inside a UNESCO classification. We are the ones who decide the identity of our heritage, not the UNESCO bureaucrats or the corrupt government». <sup>39</sup>

Besides manifesting a position of political opposition to the regime, these criticisms recalled a static conception of heritage and building traditions and conveyed an idea of safeguard as the 'museification' of difference [Gillot, Maffi & Trémon 2013]. This way of

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

conceiving the preservation of antiquities is a legacy of modern urban design, implemented in Syria from the 1920s, whose prevailing guideline was to cut off the old city, kept in its current conditions, from the development of the rest of the town [al-Asali 2020; Fries 1994, 323]. Such process, informed by a twofold attitude of respect of the Other's culture and segregationism, was implemented mainly in the French North African protectorates, for instance in the 1910s in Morocco under the administration of general Lyautey [Rabinow 1989].<sup>40</sup> The North-African model inspired the first plans of the French urban designers working in Syria in the 1920s, such as Lucien Vibert and René Danger [Fries 1994], who devised for Damascus a plan of socio-economic separation, where the new neighbourhoods were conceived to host European and local élites, while keeping the historical richness of the old city by preserving its main monuments and its 'picturesque' features [Neep 2012; Bianca 1987; Ecochard & Banshoya 1966, 1968; Lababedi 2008; Ecochard & Danger 1936].

Despite the logic of museification, changes to the buildings were common even in the centuries (XVIth-XIXth) when the ancient *medina* took its current shape. This is due to the flexible building pattern of the Arab houses [Roujon & Vilan 1997], made up by juxtaposition of different blocks (generally four) and parts, each detached from each other, that lead on to the internal courtyard. This flexible pattern made houses adaptable to changes, through partitions, additions and removals of blocks following transfers of property, inheritances and clearances for street widening. In this way the built environment could easily adapt to the changes made by the groups who inhabit it, both at the household level, and at the level of wider population movements as well, as the adaptation of houses in the former Jewish quarter shows.

The issue of safeguard through development was the subject of some news Arch Rajab posted on her Facebook profile on February 2021, testifying that the authorized heritage discourse she shares (being an expert for cultural heritage reconstruction and local development at UN-ESCWA, UNESCO, and member of ICOMOS since 2016) doesn't envisage the outright conservation of monuments. The posts were about an online conference [ourworldheritage.org] where she moderated one session, coordinated the Arab region case studies and spoke about 'Heritage as a tool for sustainable development' in another session. As the program of the session read,

historical cities and landscapes have been preserved when the inhabitants of those cities and contexts have managed to maintain them for many centuries and sometimes millennia. In all cultures, this persistence required evolution through conservation, change of uses, introduction of contemporary technologies, conservation of traditional labor, to evolve while conserving.<sup>41</sup>

The debate on the transformations of the old neighborhoods shows the existence, even within an autocratic state, in which political opposition is repressed and criminalized, of an area of public action and debate animated by a civil society which, in some respects, is contiguous to political power (Mustafa Ali, besides the national and international awards achieved thanks to his activity, shares with the Asad clan the geographical origin from

<sup>40</sup> For the transformation of the cities following the modernization of another Middle Eastern context – Egypt –, see Mitchell 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Our World Heritage, Session 10: Heritage as a language of inclusion, available at [https://www.ourworldheritage.org/sustainability\\_s10/?fbclid=IwAR0e4YRwbLzgc-dF5r4snlqY-CENs9r9n6XRA7eo01Y7p4O8ih2ZFyxykwPU](https://www.ourworldheritage.org/sustainability_s10/?fbclid=IwAR0e4YRwbLzgc-dF5r4snlqY-CENs9r9n6XRA7eo01Y7p4O8ih2ZFyxykwPU) (last accessed 25 October 2021).

the Latakia area and belonging to the Alawite sect), but whose activities are subjected to public criticism, including through social media.

## The *medina* is growing upwards

While on the one hand the practices of some preservationists can be considered a threat to the heritage by some Facebook users and others, on the other hand, the preservationists themselves believe that the most serious threats come from the building practices of the 'old inhabitants' (*as-seknan al-madi*), as they disparagingly call those groups that massively moved to Damascus during and after the 1950s, due to several push/pull factors (the failure of agrarian reform, the crisis of agriculture, recruitment in the army, political asylum as in the case of Palestinian refugees, industrialization, job search in the urban informal sectors). Many old residents, though living in the ancient *medina*, don't share the discourse and practices of patrimonialization and commonly use concrete to maintain, fix, restore, change the shape of their houses, add new part on the roofs, split rooms, turn big houses into condominiums.

Many old residents come from other regions and have been in Damascus for one or two generations. Some of them hold tight bonds with their villages, by making frequent visits to their relatives and looking for marriage partners in the hometown [Copertino 2010, 2013]. The extended patrilineal domestic group is a residential pattern that preservationists don't share, whereas old residents do. Although most of the latter do not actually live in extended domestic groups, it is a desired model, achieved in some cases. This model is popular in Damascus *reef* (countryside) too, where the wide availability of space allows to add new parts to the houses horizontally. This often happens when one son's nuclear family settles at his father's house. Many villagers of the *reef* are do-it-yourself masons; some villages I visited looked like everlasting building sites, with works in progress and heaps of cement in use. In the Damascus' *medina*, on the other hand, the lack of horizontal space hampers the extended patrilineal residential pattern. As a consequence, the old residents add new parts - made of concrete - to the houses vertically. Therefore the popular building practices allow them to achieve a desired pattern and the use of concrete is necessary to meet their dwelling needs. Some old residents' families I met were proud of their houses, because they hosted several nuclear groups.

This pattern has become extremely difficult to follow, due to the enforcement of the norms of the heritage protection,<sup>42</sup> yet it marks the landscape of the *medina*. As Arch. Al-Berry once complained during a walk with me on the roofs of a *souq* area, «the *medina* is growing upwards». At the time of my fieldwork he was an officer at Maktab 'Anbar. I spent much time with him, in order to understand the heritage politics concerning Damascus and other Syrian cities; he introduced me to his friends and colleagues, among whom all the people I'm speaking about. Later he changed his job and became a project coordina-

<sup>42</sup> Mandat de la SDN pour la Syrie et le Liban, 1922 Arrêté n. 207 du 26 Mars 1926 Portant règlement sur les Antiquités en Syrie et au Liban, Haut Commissariat de la République Française en Syrie et au Liban, Bulletin Officiel des actes administratifs du Haut Commissariat, année 12, n. 22; Arrêté n. 166/LR du 7 Novembre 1933 Portant règlement sur les Antiquités, Haut Commissariat de la République Française en Syrie et au Liban, Bulletin Officiel des actes administratifs du Haut Commissariat, année 5, n. 8; the Antiquities Law introduced in 1963 (and the following amendments from the 1960s through 2000s); the Regulation for the old city intra muros of 1986, and the Decision 826/1996, 'Restoring and rebuilding system of the old city within the walls'.

tor and site manager at Agra Khan Foundation for Architecture. Besides being friends in offline life, some years ago we became Facebook friends too. In 2020 he was in a list of fifty Syrian architects and archaeologists that became members of Icomos. The news was posted in Facebook by Abdalrazzaq Moaz, a Syrian art historian with a brilliant academic career, both national and international (he taught at Gerda Henkel Foundation in Germany and Harvard University and serves as acting dean of the Architecture Faculty at the Arab International University, Syria) who held several leading roles in Syrian politics (he was former Deputy Minister of Culture and Director General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, 2000-2002). In the post about the Syrian members of Icomos he stated: «Congratulations to all, for the ICOMOS membership and the great responsibilities and duties that come with it. I wish everyone success, and I hope that this membership constitutes the golden opportunity for all to provide greater services to our beloved country, Syria [...] and its heritage [...] its people [...] and its civilization. Among the objectives of 'ICOMOS' is to educate society in general about its heritage and civilizations and to spread ideas that contribute to preserving the heritage».<sup>43</sup> Also on this occasion, in addition to the hundreds of positive comments on the post, which interpreted the event as a signal of recovery for Syria, in relation both to the protection of heritage and to the general political, social and economic situation,<sup>44</sup> there were some criticisms.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Abdalrazzaq Moaz, Facebook, June 12, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/abdalrazzaq.moaz>.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, Mhd Kheireddin Alrifai, Professor at the Graduate Center for Restoration at the Lebanese University, commented: «Congratulations to all the colleagues whose membership has recently been accepted [...] Our afflicted national civil heritage represents an important part of the whole humanity's heritage» (*ibidem*); Rouba Jlalati, an architect from Aleppo who specialized in stone conservation, replied: «Thank you as a founding committee [...] and thank you to all those who contributed [...] We hope for the understanding and cooperation of all these parties for the ultimate goal of protecting our heritage» (*ibidem*); Raghda Jabi Husri, an architect from Damascus, commented: «Congratulations to all [...] and congratulations for every effort that leads to preserving our distinctive antiquities and civilization from sabotage and looting» (*ibidem*).

<sup>45</sup> For instance Maha Hammad, a Syrian neuropsychiatrist who lives in Paris, wrote: «There are great discrepancies between the aforementioned [...] especially for those who have reached such a responsibility through social media without the minimum requirements, if there are requirements» (*ibidem*).



**Img. 4. Mortars targeting the city center of Damascus from the suburbs in April 2014 (<https://www.facebook.com/beshralbarry>).**

Arch. Al-Berry uses his Facebook profile to share notes on events, videos, news regarding the safeguarding of cultural and architectural heritage, often in reference to news about the war. In April 2014, at a time when the area surrounding Damascus had not yet been recaptured by the Syrian regular army and the Ghouta oasis countryside was the scene of clashes, he posted a photo of mortars targeting the capital city [img. 4]. The photo was taken from the FB page of Dimashq Al'an – a group of journalists - and the caption read: «A picture carried by opposition websites shows the randomly lining up of mortars to target the capital, Damascus and its people, with indiscriminate shells». <sup>46</sup> A year and a half earlier, the city of Damascus itself had not yet been secured. At that time I had several contacts with my acquaintances, who described to me their fear of the frequent episodes of explosions, mortars and attacks that took place in the capital. In October 2012 Beshr wrote this post: «Yesterday evening a terrorist explosion took place near one of the most crowded area in Damascus, the least I can say it was an act of cowardice and an act of evil. Only the Will of God that kept us alive, my son, my wife and I were less than 100 m away from the explosion at that very moment». <sup>47</sup>

It was around this time that many of my friends and acquaintances from Damascus started seeking asylum in European countries. Beshr himself began to consider this idea, which he later abandoned, thanks to the fact that southern Syria became more secure from a military point of view. In a more serene climate, at least for those who, like Beshr, belonged to a middle class of employees, professionals and entrepreneurs with a certain economic stability, on 23 June 2013 he shared one post of Ra'ed Jabri, the owner of one of the best known cafes / restaurants in the Damascus *medina*, Beit Jabri. This is a public place very popular with preservationists, and I also spent a lot of time there during my

<sup>46</sup> Beshr al-Berry, Facebook, April 6, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/beshralbarry>.

<sup>47</sup> Beshr al-Berry, Facebook, October 8, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/beshralbarry>.

fieldwork. Although some public places existed in the *medina* before the opening of Beit Jabri (which took place in 1996), the latter is the first example of a café opened in a *beit 'Arabi*, following the growing interest in heritage and investments for restorations and redevelopments in the area included in the WHL of Unesco. Ra'ed himself - whom I met during the fieldwork and which I later became friends with on Facebook - is the descendant of an important family of local notables who had built this house in the eighteenth century and still resided there at the beginning of the twentieth (Rašad Jabri, ancestor of Ra'ed, who had been the first mayor of Damascus after independence from France, lived in the big house with his parents, eight brothers and the numerous children of these), but in the course of the twentieth century had moved partly to the modern areas of the capital, partly to other cities [Copertino 2014a]. With the growing awareness of the historical and architectural heritage, Ra'ed 'returned' to the *medina*, recovering the use of the house, restoring it and opening the first café in an Arab house in the *medina*.

The friendship relationship between Beshr and Ra'ed extends between offline life and Facebook. During my fieldwork, I found that Beshr went every day, even several times a day, to Beit Jabri, during breaks from work, to chat with Ra'ed and mutual friends, have tea, plan small restoration interventions of the building. They often comment on, share and like each other posts in Facebook concerning Damascus' heritage, such as one video posted by Beshr in October 2018 that I shared on my FB profile too, shooting a group of dancers performing a traditional Syrian dance in the alley in front of Nawfara, the best-known coffee shop in the *medina*. This post aroused controversy, related to the fact that the performance, which saw men and women dance together, had been performed near the place considered a symbol of Damascus heritage, as well as one of the Islamic places considered holiest in the world, the Umayyad mosque.<sup>48</sup>

Starting from the 1990s, on-going economic liberalization had allowed many Syrian investors like Ra'ed Jabri to enter into the real estate market. The rehabilitation of old houses in the ancient *medina* did not require large capital investment, so it attracted many people from the middle-classes, who bought cheap buildings and used them for work, habitation or as an investment. The authorities in charge of the heritage protection term this trend 'the comeback to the old city' (*raj' lil-medina al-qadima*). As I mentioned above, Ra'ed considers himself as one who 'came back' to the *medina*. In the preservationists' view, the comeback entailed the development of the ancient *medina* from a marginal district, inhabited by low-income groups unconcerned with the safeguard of its cultural aspect, to the heritage site the local authorities and UNESCO had imagined. 'Those who came back' (*yilli raj'ou*) – namely, in the local authorities' terms, the preservationists who moved to the *medina* - were better-off private citizens influenced by the discourse and practice of cultural heritage, who flew with their symbolic and economic capitals into this area. Until the burst of the current civil war, their activities led patrimonialization of Damascus to an advanced stage.

<sup>48</sup> In response to criticism, Amal al-Khoury, a Syriac literature scholar, wrote: «This is heritage: the musical group is respected and Nawfara is also known to all tour guides»; Rima al-Hamoui, a professor at the University of Aleppo: «Who talks about a place of worship and sacredness [...] This dance is a form of worship»; Perihan Jarkas, a university student who was among those who had danced: «I am happy, God, to preserve the heritage and culture [...] and the commitment of young people to our traditions» (Beshr al-Berry, Facebook, October 23, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/beshralbarry>).

Ra'ed Jabri often posts on his Facebook profile photos of Beit Jabri, of the *medina*, of neighborhoods undergoing restoration, events that take place both in his café and elsewhere, often accompanied by his thoughts and quotes.

Like those of Arch. Al-Berry, Ra'ed's posts from a few years ago also reflected the political instability and insecurity that the war had brought to Damascus and southern Syria. For instance in December 2013 he posted some pictures of Beit Jabri before the restoration showing debris and no sign of life [img. 5] and wrote: «There is a danger that it will return to such a situation [...] because of a 'freedom' missile, which is an ignorant missile, without religion, which can cause the heritage of all humanity to lose a home of its homes».<sup>49</sup>



Img. 5 The building hosting Beit Jabri before its restoration, alluding to the destructions of war (<https://www.facebook.com/raed.jabri>).

## Safeguard

Arch. Luna Rajab is among the online/offline friends of Ra'ed Jabri's and the other people I'm speaking of; she co-founded *Asdiqa Dimashq* (Friends of Damascus) association, whose activities of sensibilization led the governorate to found the Directorate of the Old City - another example of the influential role of civil society in the field of heritage protection. Friends of Damascus also spread among restorers and preservationists the discourse and practice of the so-called 'traditional materials' (*mawad taqalidiyye*) for the

<sup>49</sup> Ra'ed Jabri, Facebook, December 5, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/raed.jabri>.

restoration of ancient houses, with the corollary disincentivation of the use of concrete. This civil society conceives the use of concrete as a result of the Western-led modernization of the Middle-East and the imitation of Western building practices that the Arab world should abandon [Copertino 2010, The Agha Khan Award for Architecture 1978]. This was the subject of some conversations I had with Arch. Rajab. In February 2020 she posted on colored background a ‘status’ sentence reading: «Understanding cultural heritage in depth and extracting information from it is the way to transform it into an engine for development without falling into the trap of ‘closed loop thinking’». <sup>50</sup> Among the comments, Deema Sultan, a mechanical engineer with international education, wrote: «Or the copy trap from other cultures and societies without understanding, identity or filter». <sup>51</sup>

Starting from the 1920s, the modernization of Syria, envisaged by the League of Nations and implemented by the French Mandatory Administration, involved several operations on the urban space. In Damascus, this entailed planning wide avenues, star-shaped squares, public gardens in the new districts, pursuing an idea of openness in contrast to the narrowness of the old city, according to the orientalist stereotypes about the traditional Middle Eastern and Islamic architecture [Neep 2012; Ecochard & Banshoya 1968]. Such plans involved the massive use of concrete that, as elsewhere, defined the Syrian modern experience, conceived as an effort to transcend nature and tradition, lifting modern lifestyles above nature and the past.

The neighborhoods that arose in Damascus and elsewhere in Syria during the twentieth century testify to the expansion of concrete as a modern, dynamic, economic building material, albeit devalued compared to the building materials of ancient cities [al-Asali 2020]. For example Aleppo, the economic capital of Syria (before the recent destruction), was defined by the Damascenes as ‘the greyish city’ (*al-medina ar-ramadi*), to ironically underline the unattractive aspect of the modern Aleppo neighborhoods.

Arch. Rajab often posts on her Facebook profile news about events aimed at making people aware about the use of traditional techniques and materials in the restoration of ancient buildings; she often posts her statuses concerning this issue. For instance in February 2020 she posted a quotation reading: «Interest in heritage does not mean returning to the past, but rather is preparing for the world of tomorrow. Lara-Scarlett Gervais». <sup>52</sup>

The issue of traditional materials and techniques is the theme of some events Arch. Rajab shares on her Facebook profile. The regulations that forbid to alter the shape of buildings in the old city don’t ban explicitly the use of concrete and cement in the old city: therefore, the urban planners and Maktab ‘Anbar alternately interpret them as they either do ban such materials, or they don’t.

As is evident, these regulations, as far as they prevent the transformation of the built environment in the ancient *medina*, contradict the recognition by UNESCO itself relating to the incessant evolution of the old city. <sup>53</sup> The complex interrelationship among the issues at stake (safeguard, development, modernization, building traditions), although

<sup>50</sup> Luna Rajab, Facebook, February 20, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/luna.rajab>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> Luna Rajab, Facebook, February 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/luna.rajab>.

<sup>53</sup> In their 1978 report, Chastel, Millon, Taralon [1979] noted that Damascus had been inhabited continuously for several millennia: this was the conclusive point for the insertion of the old city in the WHL.

ignored by many Syrian Facebook heritage practitioners, is covered by the authorized heritage discourse, as is evident for instance from Arch Rajab's Facebook posts on July 2021. The protection of existing forms and 'traditional' materials is in contradiction with reconstruction practices, restoration, repairs, always done using concrete, the cheapest material and the most available in modern times.

## The city and the oasis

Many Arch Rajab's posts refer to building projects that take place in various locations in the Ghouta oasis, which surrounds the Syrian capital. These projects are aimed at seeking a balance between the housing needs of increasing numbers of inhabitants of small towns and the need to safeguard the fertile soil of the countryside. The excessive growth of these villages, in fact, erodes the fertile soils and causes a reduction in agricultural crops and water resources, the main barriers against desertification [Copertino 2010].

It is no coincidence that a heritage conservation activist is also concerned with the sustainable growth of human settlements with respect to the use and care of natural resources: in the preservationist discourse, in fact, the protection of nature is closely linked to the preservation of building traditions. The idea of the relationship between the thousands-years-old city of Damascus and its oasis was stressed by French urban designers who worked in Syria during the Mandate of the League of Nations (1920-1946) [Bianquis 1981; Naito 1986; Rafeq 1989]. This idea was conveyed to them through the works of the orientalist travellers who visited and described Syria during the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries [Lamartine 1856; Twain 1966; Kinglake 1962; Copertino 2010].

Several Arch. Rajab's posts in her Facebook profile link heritage protection to the question of the reconstruction of the country after the war. For instance on 29 December 2016, she posted a link to the webpage of the Unesco's Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage, created in 2011 through E.U. funds to monitor the situation of the cultural heritage since the beginning of the war and prepare post-conflict priority actions.<sup>54</sup> Other Arch Rajab's posts concern projects that address the interrelated issues of destruction/heritage protection/reconstruction.<sup>55</sup> These issues are related to the protection of the countryside as well, since the oasis of Damascus was affected by the war to a greater extent than the city. Indeed, the cost of securing Damascus was the destruction of the small towns and settlements of the oasis surrounding the capital city. In April 2018 Arch Rajab shared a video that documented an education and support project for the children of a village in the Ghouta oasis, Ghuzlaniyya, in the northern *reef* of Damascus, where I had spent some time during my offline fieldwork, to understand the question of the mutual construction of urban/rural cultural borders. The video was posted by Amir Karajoli, violinist of the Syrian Symphony Orchestra. The project was aimed at educating children for peace through the learning of music, providing them with models other than that of violence which, as seen in the video, was the predominant theme in their daily life. In the video Omar, one

<sup>54</sup> Unesco, Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage, available at [https://en.unesco.org/syrian-observatory/?fbclid=IwAR0BV\\_wYqyboDd40W1NoWs8ZEM3acWNZDdfU2GNBsiocOqybGxgMqRpetY](https://en.unesco.org/syrian-observatory/?fbclid=IwAR0BV_wYqyboDd40W1NoWs8ZEM3acWNZDdfU2GNBsiocOqybGxgMqRpetY) (last accessed 20 October 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Such as the international meeting Sketch for Syria I mentioned above or the seminar 'Heritage in the Arab World', session 'Heritage in the Arab World and our role as Syrian architects after the war in Syria, for its safeguard and promotion' that she shared in Facebook on 11 February 2020.

of the children from Ghuzlaniyya, said: «We spend our time playing with stones, wooden guns, there is nothing else to do [...]. They taught us to go to school, and taught us to listen to our parents and love each other and not to hit each other». <sup>56</sup> The video received thousands of views, hundreds of likes and dozens of comments. It ended with Omar who, after learning how to play the guitar very quickly, performed at the Damascus Opera House playing a classical guitar as a soloist, while a musician from the orchestra accompanied him playing a small rudimentary guitar, built with makeshift material by Omar's father. As Ziad Abu Iiad Faraj, an acquaintance and informant of mine from Ghuzlaniyya, told me years ago, «There, in Sham, there is money. Here the children work, because they think of their families who have to make sacrifices for them. In the city they send all the children to school, even if they are dunces and if they fail. The children of the countryside are smarter, albeit poorer!». <sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

The authorized heritage discourse (with its awareness of the complex interrelationship among safeguard, development, modernization, building traditions) and the affective dimension of heritage (stressed by many Syrian Facebook heritage practitioners) are often in sharp contrast between each other. Whereas the latter excludes changes, reuse, adaptations of heritage, the former is more pragmatic and doesn't involve necessarily a struggle against forbidden materials (such as concrete) and transformations.

The development and continuation of people's relationships between Facebook and offline life does not necessarily imply a clear break between real and virtual. The activities of safeguarding and enhancing the heritage of a group of Syrian Facebook friends, who are friends even in offline life, as well as the friendly relationships between them, proceed seamlessly in online and offline life. Their activism on Facebook demonstrates the effectiveness and consequentiality of the role of civil society in Syria and the space for criticism that it creates, even within an authoritarian state and in an undemocratic political context. The different conceptions of heritage, the contrast between the authorized heritage discourse and the affective dimension of heritage, and the different perspectives concerning the protection and transformation of ancient urban spaces, following the damage deriving from war and from building practices that preservationists consider inappropriate, provoke debates and criticisms that also involve the Syrian regime and the cultural environments close to it, as shown for instance by the critiques towards the Street Art Symposium organized by Mustafa Ali Art Foundation.

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<sup>56</sup> Luna Rajab, Facebook, April 30, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/luna.rajab>.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

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