

# The Cultural Meaning of Aleppo

A Landscape Recovery for  
the Ancient City

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Part of the Critical Studies in Architecture  
of the Middle East series

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**intellect** Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA

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## Introduction

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Why Aleppo is Important: Framework and War Scenario

Located at the crossroads of trans-national caravan routes, the city of Aleppo has been continuously inhabited since the 2nd millennium BC, and successively ruled over by culturally diverse populations who have left their footprints on the urban fabric and building typologies.

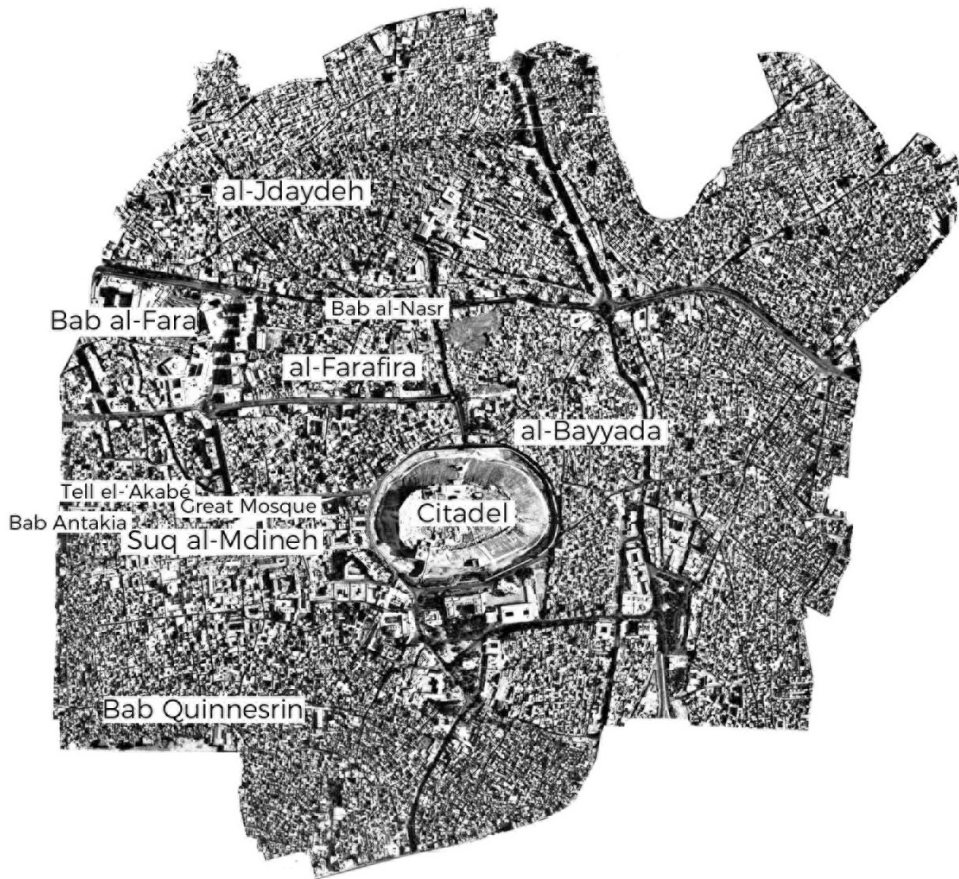
The Citadel rising above the Suq al-Mdineh, the Great Mosque and the various Ottoman madrasas, courtyard houses and buildings, *khans* (wide commercial courtyard buildings) and public baths are part of an urban landscape that provides evidence of the early Greek-Roman street layout and contains remnants of Roman and Byzantine buildings, as well as of Medieval Ayyubid and Mamluk architecture. Here, since Antiquity, commercial and public areas have developed along the suqs set on the territorial routes leading from the very city centre of the Great Mosque to the city gates. The residential clusters, however, were arranged around cul-de-sacs, with their own ethnic-religious organization.

In 1986 Aleppo was listed as a World Heritage Site for the value of an urban layout resulting from the stratification of rich and diverse cultures, and for the co-presence of residential, commercial, religious and public buildings.<sup>3</sup>

Given the poor state of conservation of the urban fabric, action for the rehabilitation of the Ancient City began in the 1990s, and a UN-World-Heritage-protected area comprising 355 hectares of traditional building fabric was chosen as the site for effective urban renewal: in 1994, the Urban Rehabilitation Project for Old Aleppo was set up under the Municipality of Aleppo and in cooperation with international agencies; in 1999, the Directorate of the Old City was established to guide the urban rehabilitation, a joint undertaking with GTZ (German Technical Cooperation)<sup>4</sup> and several partner institutions. Under this framework, a comprehensive plan for the rehabilitation and development of the Ancient City was prepared.<sup>5</sup> [Figure 1]

The remarkable value of this heritage-driven rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of the historic town was recognized in 2005 by Harvard University's Graduate School of Design (GSD), which awarded the City of Aleppo the Eighth Veronica Rudge Green Prize in Urban Design for a project that transmitted a vital new meaning by focusing on the restoration of urban fabric rather than monuments, and by involving the city's inhabitants as protagonists of such improvements.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, in 2007, the Syrian-German Urban Development Program (UDP) was created. Together with the Aga Khan Foundation (within the framework of the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme), the UDP would go on to contribute greatly to preservation efforts in the city. In 2008 the GTZ produced the *ToolKit for Urban Conservation and Development*<sup>7</sup> with

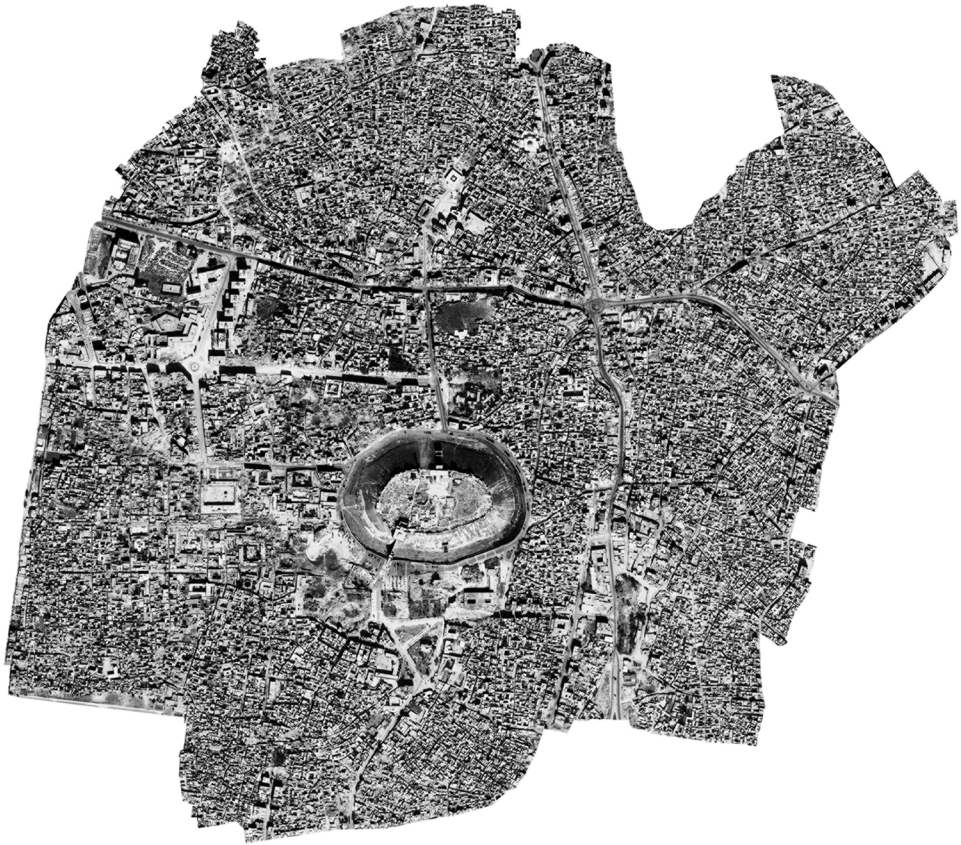


**Figure 1:** The Ancient City of Aleppo, aerial view, 2008, showing the main sites and districts mentioned in the book.

a contribution from the Directorate of the Old City, with the aim of sharing the knowhow on urban conservation developed in Aleppo with experts and practitioners working in other World Heritage Cities.

With the outbreak of war in Syria, the boundaries of the World Heritage Site of the Ancient City of Aleppo became the scene of the ‘Battle of Aleppo’, as the media dubbed it, between 2012 and 2016. The large-scale devastation of the conflict left the core of the city in ruins, especially the area around the Suq al-Mdineh and the Citadel and the neighbourhoods of al-Jdaydeh and al-Farafira, in addition to widespread damage to the city’s major monuments and urban fabric, including repeated targeting of traditional courtyard houses. The destruction displaced thousands of residents from their homes and neighbourhoods and left the city in desperate need of extensive reconstruction, to say nothing of its social and economic wounds. [Figure 2]





**Figure 2:** The Ancient City of Aleppo, aerial view, 2017, showing damage at the urban level.

Accordingly, in 2013 the World Heritage Committee inscribed the Ancient City of Aleppo on the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger<sup>8</sup> and organized the *High-Level Technical Meeting on the Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage*.<sup>9</sup>

In 2014 UNESCO organized the International Experts Meeting *Rallying the International Community to Safeguard Syria's Cultural Heritage*<sup>10</sup> and an international conference on the *Protection of Heritage and Cultural Diversity at Risk in Iraq and Syria*,<sup>11</sup> calling for the creation of 'protected cultural zones' around cultural heritage sites, such as emblematic monuments in the Ancient City of Aleppo. Considering the need to coordinate humanitarian and security actions, the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris held another meeting in 2015 entitled *Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the Middle East Context and in the Old City of Aleppo in Particular*.<sup>12</sup> An action plan resulted in which a recovery strategy and guidelines for preserving cultural and natural heritage were established, including the need to gather documentation and to reinforce capacity-building activities.



In 2016 the World Heritage Committee requested humanitarian and security actions be undertaken in coordination with cultural heritage stakeholders, to avoid further irreversible damage to World Heritage property, asking for detailed studies and extensive fieldwork before undertaking any work in the Ancient City,<sup>13</sup> and called upon the international and national cultural heritage professionals to unite in the safeguarding of Syria's cultural heritage and coordinate their initiatives with UNESCO.<sup>14</sup> In the same year, a second international meeting, *Follow-up to the implementation of the UNESCO Action Plan for the Emergency Safeguarding of Syria's Cultural Heritage*, was organized jointly with the German Foreign Office in Berlin<sup>15</sup> with the objective of fostering a common vision and finalizing a road map concerning Syria's heritage.

A further step in this process was made when Italy suggested a UNESCO *Emergency Task Force for Culture*<sup>16</sup> and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) prepared a *Guidance on Post Trauma Recovery and Reconstruction for World Heritage Cultural Properties*,<sup>17</sup> a document focused on World Heritage properties that, as a result of traumatic events, have lost attributes of Outstanding Universal Value.

In 2017, the World Heritage Committee called for the development of comprehensive conservation strategies and actions,<sup>18</sup> reiterated the request to avoid further irreversible damage, and urged the development of integrated strategic plans for the rehabilitation and revitalization of the Ancient City of Aleppo in its broader urban context, in line with the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*,<sup>19</sup> as well as reemphasized the need for completing detailed studies and extensive fieldwork prior to the implementation of any project.<sup>20</sup>

To start the planning process for reconstruction, in March 2017 UNESCO convened the 'Technical and Coordination Meeting for the Ancient City of Aleppo', bringing together representatives of the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), the Aleppo City Council, the Ministry of Tourism, the Directorate of Aleppo Awqaf (Ministry of Religious Endowments) and NGOs and universities to present legal, technical and scientific initiatives. The meeting yielded a *Table of Actions for the Recovery of the Ancient City*,<sup>21</sup> which, in relation to any future plan for recovery, considered issues of gentrification, bottom-up approaches, tourist development, technological upgrading, urban regeneration, landscape, and the integration of different actors and expertise, all framed within the implementation of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*<sup>22</sup> and UNESCO decisions and conventions.<sup>23</sup>

In March 2018 UNESCO convened a conference in Warsaw entitled *The Challenges of World Heritage Recovery: International Conference on Reconstruction*. The participants to this meeting drafted the *Warsaw Recommendation on recovery and reconstruction of Cultural Heritage*,<sup>24</sup> which laid out steps aimed at facilitating reconciliation and the return of displaced local residents via the reconstruction and recovery of the built, cultural, social and economic environment.

Finally, in June 2018, DGAM prepared *The Intervention Plan For Aleppo Ancient City*, a document aimed at identifying urgent actions and immediate execution phases,

which include the gathering of all available data, reviewing previous plans, evaluating current problems, amending building codes, and providing training to technicians and craftsmen.

## This Book

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Due to significant destruction of Syria's cultural heritage during the war, a series of meetings were organized by groups of multidisciplinary experts to brainstorm on the issue of damage assessment and post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>25</sup> UNESCO has been raising awareness,<sup>26</sup> and several ongoing initiatives<sup>27</sup> have sought to document damage<sup>28</sup> and to gather existing archives, historical data and recent surveys and documentation.<sup>29</sup> For the purposes of this book, the following reconstruction-related projects should be mentioned: the *Aleppo Archive in Exile – Plan of the Old City of Aleppo*, a 1:500 scale map of the ground floors of the Old City of Aleppo within the UNESCO boundaries;<sup>30</sup> the project *Crossroads Aleppo: Our City, shared Heritage, our Memory. A project to document the World Heritage site of Aleppo*, which has produced documentation on the architectural and social history of some of the most important monuments in the Ancient City;<sup>31</sup> and *Aleppo at the Meeting of Ways – Documenting the Built Cultural Heritage of Aleppo*, which documents the destruction of historical monuments in the Old City and catalogues its structures.<sup>32</sup>

But documenting is not enough. Today, as the war finally ends, we are asked to figure out how to rebuild the cultural landscape of the Ancient city of Aleppo by recovering and reconstructing its urban fabric that was used as a frontline.

Under these circumstances, thoughtful and rigorous design strategies for the recovery of the unique cultural heritage of the Ancient City are needed.

In particular, at a moment when international attention is focused on the reconstruction of the Suq al-Mdineh, the Great Mosque and the area to the south of the Citadel, and the restoration of monuments seems an obvious and unproblematic goal, it is necessary to open a debate on the future design strategies to recover the fine-grained urban fabric of the historic neighbourhoods, ensuring the inhabitants' right to resettle in their homes, while preserving the inherited cultural characteristics of the urban landscape.<sup>33</sup>

What happened to Aleppo is not new: as for Berlin, Dresden, London, Sarajevo, Mostar, Beirut and many other cities all over the world, the city has been devastated by a terrible war, which has also affected its built environment.

For Aleppo, as for other cities in the midst of wartime crisis, there was no way to mitigate or interrupt the battle and the consequent uricide. Today, however, we have the moral duty to envisage possible scenarios that could influence the recovery of its historic urban landscape, both for better or worse.

Focusing on the need to safeguard what remains of the city's authentic building fabric, and recovering the ruins of its architectural heritage, is of great importance. Against a potential scenario where economic interests prevail over the reconstruction of the urban

identity, it is particularly important to retain the characteristics that the built environment of the Ancient City had before the conflict started, and, therefore, to rebuild it in continuity with its inherited urban form.

We must also consider how the destruction wrought by war creates unforeseen opportunities for the rediscovery of new layers of history and urban culture, for instance, at Bab al-Nasr, in al-Farafira and al-Jdaydeh, or in the heavy damaged area at the foot of the Citadel.

Based on this premise, this book carries with it a message of hope for Aleppo too.

Dealing with the landscape morphology and the building typology of courtyard houses of the Ancient City, it highlights the cultural characteristics of Aleppo's built environment. By including architectural surveys of clusters of courtyard houses and neighbourhoods, it presents methodological proposals for the urban renewal of residential areas and open spaces.

The book is organized in three chapters. The first chapter, *The Cultural Significance of Aleppo's Forma Urbis*, describes the urban history of the Ancient City through a reading of the morphology of its urban fabric, treating it as a text. This is particularly important for an urban landscape that is derived from a linear growth process, and from the stratifications and superimpositions of many diverse urban models and living concepts, which are still co-present and readable within its morphology. All the interconnected layers and stratification of formative stages have defined the cultural system of spatial relationship between buildings and open spaces and monuments and courtyard houses that qualified Aleppo as a World Heritage Site, and which must be retained and enhanced.

The second chapter, *The Cultural Significance of the Courtyard Houses*, focuses on dwelling culture and on the sustainable relationship between courtyard houses and urban landscape. It describes their structure, looking in particular at the connection between open spaces and built surface, on the aggregative logic of rooms around the courtyard, on the orientation and use of rooms to control the microclimate, on the steady aggregative logic for houses and palaces, on the layout of inner gardens, and on the resulting urban morphology. If urbanism in the Ancient City of Aleppo is deeply linked to the courtyard house, considering the cultural significance of their typology means reconstructing while retaining the overall characteristics of the authentic urban landscape.

Finally, the Battle of Aleppo has endangered the local 'cultural memory' and has renewed awareness of the vulnerability of cultural heritage. Framed within the physical and theoretical framework of reconstruction, the third chapter, *The Cultural Significance of the Reconstruction*, proposes a possible scenario for cultural regeneration of the historic urban landscape in the Ancient City, and for the recovery of its sustainability, authenticity, and identity.

Of course, it is rather impossible to analyse, understand and respond to such a complex scenario from only a single point of view. All the elements shaping an urban landscape should be reinterpreted as a possible basis for regeneration, because each single interpretation depends on the particular way we direct our attention, and what we see is related to the criteria we use to interpret it, as well as to our own particular background.

Urban landscape renewal is a complex process, which is therefore difficult to achieve and demands many different skills and methodological approaches to be comprehensive and sustainable.

This book envisions one of the many possible aspects of this process, which has as its focus on the physical regeneration of the Ancient City through the renewal of the residential areas, starting from an interpretation of the morphological processes as well as the spatial and building codes that gave rise to the urban form. Outlining a theoretical framework and design scenario for the physical regeneration of the clusters of courtyard houses that were heavily damaged, or that just need to be renovated and updated to current living standards, it aims to put forward methodological tools for a quicker resettlement of the Ancient City inhabitants into their dwellings and neighbourhoods, with the subsequent rehabilitation and recovery of local cultural heritage and identity. Future reconstruction must be grounded on the uniqueness of this urban landscape and planned in continuity with the spatial characteristics of this World Heritage Site.

Moreover, considering the extensive destruction of the old core of the city and the emergency phase as a first step in the reconstruction process, this book aims at setting methodologies to give a chance to the people of Aleppo to return to their homes soon, providing guidelines on how to rebuild their houses, or at least on the starting points for sustainable reconstruction.