

## Mapping Spatial Social Aspects of Urban Recovery in contested cities: A Case of The Historic Commercial Center of The Ancient City of Aleppo

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**Topic:** T1.2. Urban studies of vernacular architecture

### Abstract

*Cultural heritage can initiate pride in one's own identity. Therefore, in wars, the destruction of cultural heritage is weaponized as a tool aspired at disabling communities and demoralizing them. At the same time, reconstruction is a sensitive matter, and the process of post-conflict reconstruction has the potential either to advance social recovery or to hamper it. Consequently, the inclusion of all the affected communities is crucial. The old city of Aleppo is a classic case as rehabilitation projects in the historic commercial center have started to emerge. Those projects focus on the physical destruction of the city, neglecting the social damage, and failing to engage and reflect on the locals' needs and ambition on how to rebuild their heritage. Due to this neglect, this paper is seeking to bring the social dimension of the rehabilitation process to the discussion and promote a people-centered approach in the decision-making of the post-conflict rehabilitation process in the ancient city of Aleppo. This paper is seeking to create a framework so reconstruction decisions will be based on people's aspirations and vision. A collection of research methods was used to examine the above-mentioned points. These methods included: onsite field observation to collect data, (specifically, the Souk area) conducting interviews with shop owners, local people who live in Aleppo and from the diaspora (in summer 2020 and winter 2021), and setting an online questionnaire survey (June and July 2021). Findings were outlined in a base conceptual map for the post-conflict rehabilitation.*

**Keywords:** people-centered approaches; heritage; survey; Aleppo.

### 1. Introduction

Managing urban recovery requires decision-makers to understand and deal with layers of complexity, their interactions, and their integrating processes. Therefore, doing so in a historic urban landscape adds another layer of complexity. How to balance competing forces and urgent demands in a context of highly complicated and uncertain post-conflict situations?

The required actions to accomplish urban recovery in World Heritage cities damaged by conflicts go beyond authenticity and integrity; they are complex processes that also address

socio-economic issues and the needs of local communities (Farnaz et al., n.d.). In the post-conflict recovery of historical places, the idea of looking at cultural heritage as a static vision that must be “rebuilt” and not negotiated with local actors, could add to the challenges of contested cities. Thus, the paper's approach is built on the 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL)(UNESCO, 2019) and the research's investigation is focused on the social dimension in the reconstruction process of historical cities. The case study is the historical commercial center of Aleppo, as its rehabilitation projects have started. However, those projects are neglecting the social

dimension in recovery, and people are turning away from coming back to the Souks (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Souk Al Sakkatia recently rehabilitated in the ancient commercial center and only one shop is open that appears in the photo, (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2021).

Due to this gap, the paper is seeking to bring the communities' ideas to the decision-making processes by taking the Souks as a case study and investigating the spatial transformation of the commercial center and the visions of post-traumatic societies. The paper is seeking to focus on the possibilities of rebuilding the central commercial historic area with a vision that takes into account points of view, experiences and the interests of the social actors who live in that space.

### 1.1 Historical background: Aleppo at the crossroads of trade routes

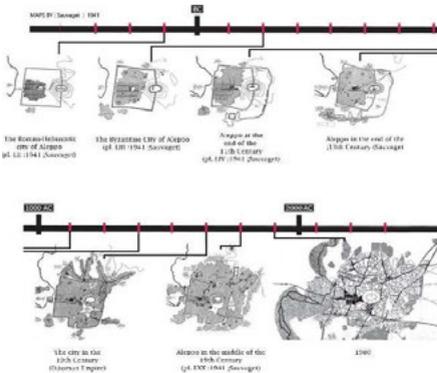


Fig. 2. Development of Aleppo from Hellenistic Period based on Sauvaget maps, 1941.

The ancient city of Aleppo was prosperous since the third millennium BC, and it remained in an

important position, urbanization, and population throughout the centuries (Fig. 2). The city played a distinguished role in the history of the region. The old city of Aleppo is a world heritage and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It was the economic-industrial center of Syria and once the crossroads of many trade routes between countries. This importance was due to two main reasons:

First, its strategic location made it play a distinguished role in the history of the region. It was a commercial city, and the design of its street markets dates to the Hellenistic period. The main hub of the old souks was an important commercial focal point that attracted the city's residents and rural residents. Secondly, due to the economically and socially influential upper class from wholesalers, merchants, merchants dealing with international trade, stakeholders, and bank owners, those who knew how to take advantage of the properties of Aleppo's site, just as they knew how to take advantage of the favorable conditions in the global economy. Those who turned Aleppo into a cultural commercial hub (Gaubé & Eugen, 1984).

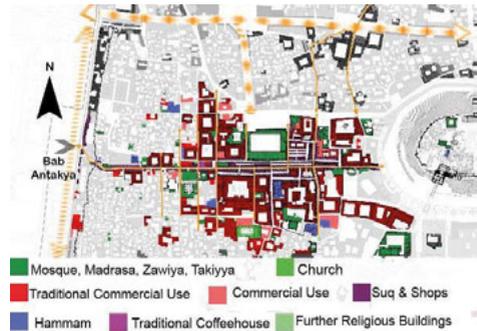


Fig. 3. The historic commercial center buildings' functions, Souk Al Medina, based on the Plan of Aleppo Archive in Exile, 2021.

However, during the war, those merchants left the city, and Aleppo was militarized, destroyed, and then abandoned, for five years (Apr 2012 – Dec 2016) (UN-Habitat & SwissAgency for Development SDC, 2014) (Fig. 4). Even after 2016 when the hostilities had subsided in the old city, the city stayed abandoned. The paper

investigated the priorities of interventions in local communities' minds and the changes in the demographic structure of the city during and after the conflict.



Fig. 4. Aleppo city. Part D is the abandoned ancient city of Aleppo (Source: UN-Habitat, Swiss Agency for Development SDC).

## 2. Methodology

The methodological approach of this paper involves a three-step process: First is defining the social and economic challenges in the historic center through a reading of the situation before the war (previous onsite observation and analyses of the situation). Second, systematic reading of the rehabilitation projects happening, the transformation dynamics and the social mesh, the reading is based on the author's experience and work (as restoration architect in Aleppo). In addition, onsite observation methods were done and semi-structured interviews with Aleppies from professionals, merchants, and locals residing in Aleppo. Third, conducting **an online questionnaire with 107 participants** who lived in Aleppo before the war. The paper focuses on the survey results and introduce the methodology as it is a part of wider research about the social dimension in Aleppo's recovery.

### 2.1 The Survey

The survey aims to understand the experience and the reasons for leaving the Souks and seeks to measure the local communities' attachment to the Souks and understand their most familiar paths (axes) that lead to the Souks. This survey also aims to understand pre-conflict problems associated with the Souks and the needs and life requirements as well as the contemporary investment possibilities of the Souks. The survey focuses on the assessment of the ancient Souks' accessibility

and the local community's attachment to them. It was divided into three main sections: Memory (past) – Present (challenges and possibilities) – and Future (hope, heritage, and Sense of Belonging). The assessment of the survey aimed to understand the pre-conflict problems associated with the Souks and to create a mental map-ping of the main pedestrian paths while taking into consideration the importance of reviving familiarity with the historical place. The criteria for prioritizing the historical building rehabilitation were specified through assessment.

### 2.2 Description of the questionnaire survey

The questionnaire was designed to collect data on respondents' profiles (gender, age, academic level, and place of residence). Respondents' experience and information about the Souks and heritage of the ancient city of Aleppo. They were asked questions that indicated general information about the visitors or traders of the Souks: Questions about pre-conflict period, and post-conflict period. The online questionnaire conducted in 2021 indicated people who lived in Aleppo before the war, their knowledge, practices reflections, and experiences about the Souks. The respondents confirmed they lived in Aleppo before the war. The survey was shared through Facebook and WhatsApp groups, people from Aleppo were addressed and tagged in the comments, and was completed by 106 respondents. Questionnaire instructions indicated the survey's content and purpose and estimated completion time. A consent question was included in the online questionnaire, to be selected by the respondent. The questionnaire was available from 23/05 to 16/08/2021 and 18/08 to 22/08/2021. Gender Distribution: 27% Female, 73% Male. Age distribution: Almost 48 % of the respondents are in the age range of 26 -35 years old, 18% in the range of 18-25, 15% in the range of 46-60, and 4 over 61 years old, who lived through the war in Aleppo. Place of residence now: 42% are still living in Aleppo, 55% outside Syria and 3% live in Syria but outside Aleppo. The survey and the semi-structured interviews covered the complex social layer of Aleppo's Society as follows:

Occupation	N
Merchant in the Aleppo Souks and a Shop owner in Aleppo Souks	4
Merchant in the Aleppo Souks and a Shop owner in Aleppo Souks and from Local community as I work in other sectors of the Aleppo economy	1
Merchant in Aleppo Souks	7
A shop owner in Aleppo Souks and a merchant in the Aleppo Souks and I work in the Souk	1
A Shop owner in Aleppo Souks;	1
Worker in Aleppo Souks	2
Worker in Aleppo Souks and work in other sectors of the Aleppo economy	1
A shop owner in Aleppo Souks and I work at the University of Aleppo	1
Merchant in the Aleppo Souks, Shop owner in Aleppo Souks, and I work in an NGO	1
Merchant in the Aleppo Souks, work at a government administration Aleppo Governorate / the city council of Aleppo;	1
A shop owner in Aleppo Souks I work at the University of Aleppo	1
A textile trader in the old city	1
Children clothes	1
I have my own business in the food industry	1
University of Aleppo	21
Master / Doctoral Student	3
University Student	5
Architecture Student University of Aleppo	1
Architect and I study for my master's in architecture in Germany	1
Local Community Associations and A student at the Archeology Faculty	1
Translator	1
Government administration: Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums;	8
Government administration: Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, I work at the University of Aleppo and Directorate of the ancient city of Aleppo	1
Government administration: Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums;	8
Government administration: Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, I work at the University of Aleppo and Directorate of the antient city of Aleppo;	1
Government administration: Employee at Aleppo Governorate or the city council	4
Local community: I work in other sectors of the Aleppo economy;	8
Local Community Associations, University of Aleppo, and I work in other sectors of the Aleppo economy;	1
NGOs	7
Engineer	1

Friday preacher in an archaeological mosque, I work at the University of Aleppo and from the Local community: I work in other sectors of the Aleppo economy	1
A photographer of old neighborhoods and interested in coloring old photos and archives	1
Railway employee	1
Islamic Endowments	1
Teacher	2
Architect	4
Students	2
Doctor	1
I do not work because I am still continuing my studies	1
blank	1
NGOs	7
Tailor	1
Teacher	2
Local Community Associations	1

Table 1. Respondents' profiles.

### 3. Findings

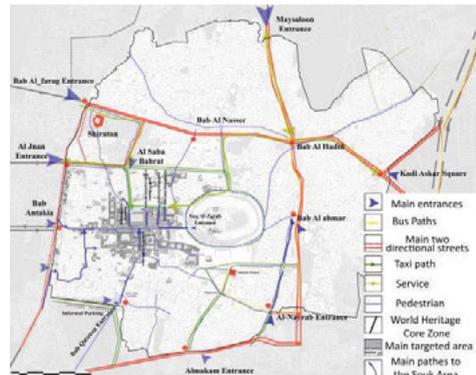


Fig. 5. Aleppo Historical commercial center as indicated by the respondents to the questionnaire.

#### 3.1 The historic commercial center before the war

##### 3.1.1 Challenges in Social Attitudes in The Historical Souks

The people's usage of historical buildings was investigated. Some problems were resulting from gaps between the conservation strategies and the socio-economic realities of the historic center. The consequences of these strategies can be seen in the changes that the merchants implemented to the historical structures of the old Souks (Fig. 6).

Khans were used as residential spaces by adding cement structures in the courtyards, some Souks were abandoned or used as parking areas for the service cars like in Khan Khayer Baik. Even the administrative uses made the khan not accessible to the public, like the usage of Khans as a consulate or governmental buildings, this added another reason to the lack of heritage value knowledge that Aleppo's community suffered.



Fig. 6. (right) is the residential structure in one of the Khans, (left) is the usage of the courtyard as parking (Source: Aleppo University's workshop).

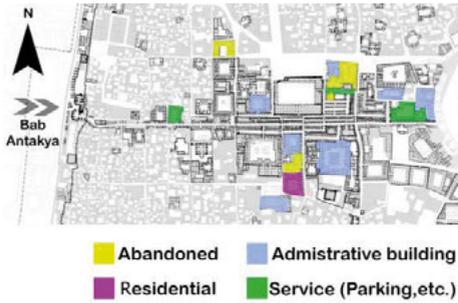


Fig. 7. The “controversial use” of Historical Souks and Khans before the war, (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2022).

### 3.1.2 Important Souks Before the War

When asked about the most frequently visited Souks or Khans before the conflict, the respondents answered that the Textile Souks in general were the most frequently visited before the war. This goes to the importance of the textile trade in Aleppo as one of the interviewees said: “the Souk is like a stock market (Bursah) so we do not have all of our commodities in it, however, all the big deals happen there”. Also, Spices Souk or Souk Al Attarin (Fig. 9) was mentioned 28 times by respondents, one of the interviewees talked about her memories of going to buy spices and smelling the spices in the Souk, “Memories of me shopping in Souk Al-Atarin Can't be erased, I can smell Aleppo with this memory”, 15

% of the respondents said they did not frequently visit the old city of Aleppo, however, 75 % of them answered that there is a strong connection between the rehabilitation of the urban heritage (in our case the Souks) and the sense of belonging to the city.

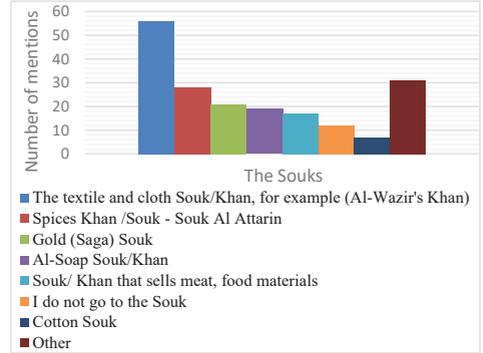


Fig. 8. The Souks or Khans visited most frequently before the conflict.



Fig. 9. Main Rubble area of Souk Al Attarin (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2022).

## 3.2. During the war

### 3.2.1. Social and Physical Damage

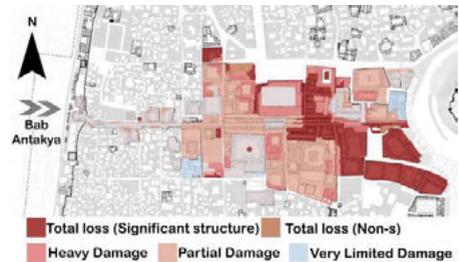


Fig. 10. Damage plan in 2016, (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2021).

The main rubble area (Souk Al Attarin) that is shown in figure 9 and 10 was the range of weapons that were fired from the citadel according to the interviews/survey. The

destruction was caused by the crossfire and explosions that occurred during the war, such as the Carlton bombing, which destroyed the entire building. During the war, the damage was not limited to the physical structure, the social fabric was severely damaged too. The tenants and owners of the shops were displaced outside the old city and the central commercial center became paralyzed since 2012 (UN-Habitat & SwissAgency for Development SDC, 2014).

### 3. 3. After war situation

#### 3.3.1 Updated damage plan and rehabilitation projects

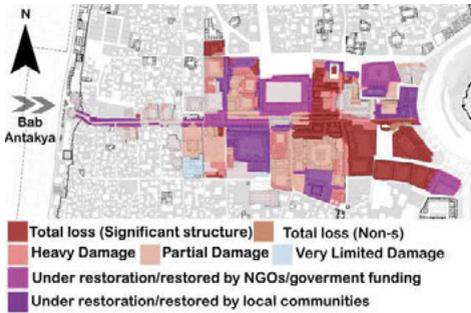


Fig. 11. Rehabilitation projects and damage plan, (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2021).

Rehabilitation projects funded by NGOs and governmental agencies (Fig. 11) are more focused on the less damaged buildings (Souk Al Saqqatia), centralization of the site and religious symbols of the city (Umayyad Mosque).

#### 3.3.2 Trends in Demography: Social, economic and demographic changes after the war

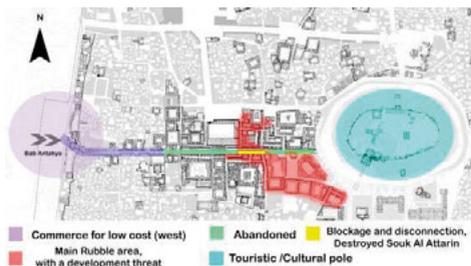


Fig. 12. Spatial social analysis, the map shows the central commercial historic area (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2021).

Commercial activities “emigrated” during and after the war outside of the Old City. For example, according to our interviewees, the textile commerce emigrated to “Al-Jabiria” area, and Al Bodaaji shops which present the traditional perfume commerce emigrated to “Al-Furkkan” in new Aleppo. The damage to the social-economic fabric is a key factor in the abandonment of the city.

The Souk currently has two poles that began to show after the war: commerce for low cost (west) Fig. 13, and culture (east) Fig. 14. The straight Street or Souk Al Madina (Al Madina as the residents say it) meets up with the large perpendicular throughway, starts at Bab Antakya one of the main entrances to the old souk, and ends at Souk Al Zarab. Preserved and free of severe damage in the last years, the western entrance of the souk is currently active with low-cost commerce. However, as one moves along the Straight Street, the condition of the buildings and pathways deteriorates.



Fig. 13. west of the Souk (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2022).



Fig. 14. The citadel in the east area cultural events (Source: © Al Arab UK, 2021).



Fig. 15. Abandoned East (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2022).

Much of the middle and eastern parts of the souk are highly damaged, destroyed, and filled with rubble. At its eastern end, lies the ancient citadel, which suffered only minimal damage, and in recent history has begun to, once again, host cultural events such as concerts. Therefore, the old souk of Aleppo lies between two poles which have begun in recent months and years to grow. While much of the rubble has been cleared to the side of the pathways and into old buildings for future rebuilding, one area of the pathway was reported as a major obstacle which lies to the east of the central path through the Souk. Inhabitants find it dangerous and dark and tend to avoid it. Therefore, a blockage between the west and east exists, the blockage of rubble Souk Al Attarin (the spices Souk) and abandoned Souk Al Al Zarab (Fig. 15, 16).



Fig. 16. Main Rubble area with a development threat, the rubble of Souk Al Attarin (Source: © S. Ibrahim, 2021).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Spatial-social indicators

Several variables were investigated through the survey and interviews as follows:

- Al Medina Souk deterioration
- Previous use of the site.
- Sites' current use, activities, and rehabilitation projects.
- Accessibility and mobility.
- Trends in demographics.

Guiding Principles for Rehabilitation of Aleppo Souk based on the analysis to reflect on the local context is suggested by the research. First, the periods of rehabilitation can be divided into three phases (Bianca et al., 2018) as follows:

Short Term: 1-5 years: a focus on buildings that are lightly damaged and activities around

commerce, education, socialization, and culture. Medium Term: 5-20 years: a focus on moderately to seriously damaged sites, with the construction of more complex forms of working and commercial enterprises, an expanded repair of networked infrastructural systems (roads, water, electricity), and most access between all roads accomplished.

Long Term: 20-50 years: a focus on highly damaged or destroyed buildings, especially ancient and prestige architecture, which take immense financial and human resources to repair.

Connection of cultural and commercial activities, Since the Souk is located at the heart of the old city of Aleppo. Bridging the western side of the souk, currently a center for low-cost commerce, and the eastern side of the souk, where the citadel hosts large and elaborate cultural gatherings, can bring culture and commerce together. The souk could become again of social and financial exchange. In addition to the rehabilitation of the main many commercial shops that lie between these two poles. In addition, finding ways to invite people through the blockage of Souk Al Attarin in short-term interventions will be a key in rehabilitating the Souk. Punctuated Urban Rehabilitation through the Khans and addressing the current situation in the Souk. A key factor is to bring people back into the city, but also to provide the sort of activities that keep people in a city: jobs, education, and entertainment. One of the most important aspects will be to bring people together in sociality and create public spaces. Starting points for these kinds of interactions include taking part in artistic and cultural events, and places to eat and make small purchases.

### 4.2 Results

Findings were outlined in a conceptual base map for the post-conflict rehabilitation (Fig. 17). The revival of Aleppo Souk in short-term interventions, by focusing on the catalytic Souk mentioned in the survey (Souk Al Attarin) the disconnection area between the eastern part of the Main Path and the western which is creating division in the city between people with high income and people with modest income or even poor.

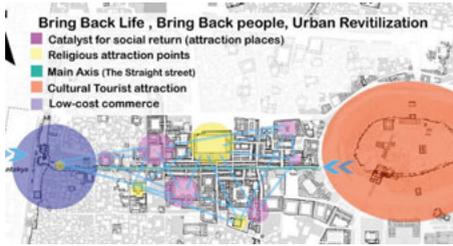


Fig. 17. Concept proposal (Source: S. Ibrahim, 2021).

## 5. Conclusions

The Migration of commerce and the dynamics of commercial decentralization are key factors in the urban recovery of the historic commercial center of Aleppo. Thus, further research should be done about the new commercial centers that emerged on the city's edges after the war as a reaction to the paralyzes of the old city.

The research showed that rehabilitation projects neglect the people's priorities that were shown through the survey and the spatial analysis. The neglect was reflected in the abandonment of the rehabilitated areas. However, the paper shows that drawing together the two energies/poles, economies, and demographics into the center of the souk so that the heart of the souk once again becomes a place of culture and commerce is an important factor in the recovery of the commercial center and an approach to avoid gentrification.

By observing the current dynamics conditioned by the past and present and changing societal and economic needs, the research focused on the possibilities of rebuilding the central commercial historic area with a vision that is more humane and more responsive to the contemporary needs of local communities after the conflict. Policymakers and regenerators could use this research to propose a tailored local context-based framework for the post-conflict regeneration of contested cities. The research offers an important example of methods used to understand indicators to accomplish people-centered approaches in the recovery process. Mapping spatial social aspects

of urban recovery methodology were explained. Also, preparing for reconstruction decisions is based on understanding people's aspirations and societal vision through the survey. The survey is a tool to activate community participation in the decision-making of urban rehabilitation and it would be further investigated in the next publications to show the social and physical inspection of the building, supported by questionnaires and interviews with residents.

## Acknowledgments

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