Thesis Booklet

Reconstruction of Architectural Heritage Aftermath of the War: Aleppo Ancient City (Madīnat Ḥalab al-Qadīmah)

Candidate: Lina Sultan Kutiefan

Programme: Doctoral School of History

Institution: Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest

Supervisor: Prof. Zsolt Vasáros

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Abstract

This thesis examines the challenges and possibilities for post-war architectural heritage rehabilitation, using the Ancient City of Aleppo as its primary case study. Through analysis of international conservation doctrine, global reconstruction precedents, and detailed examination of Syrian case studies, the research develops a context-sensitive framework for ethical intervention.

The investigation addresses three research questions: (1) What challenges are associated with preserving postwar architecture in historically sensitive locations? (2) What are possible solutions for rehabilitation, balancing international conservation principles with local realities? (3) How critical is pre- and post-conflict architectural documentation, and what role can digital technologies play?

The thesis argues that heritage reconstruction is never merely technical—it is a profound social, psychological, and political act. For Aleppo, recovery must be guided by six principles: Material Evidence, Documentary Fidelity, Spatial Continuity, Community Meaning, Transparency, and Gradual Implementation. The detailed case study of Bayt Ajqbāsh demonstrates how these principles apply at the building scale, offering a replicable model for ethical intervention across the Ancient City.

Keywords

Aleppo Ancient City | Ottoman Architecture | Post-War Recovery | Cultural Heritage | Historical Cities | War Impact | Architectural Heritage | Reconstruction Planning | World Heritage (UNESCO) | Preservation | Urban Heritage | Conservation Plan | Re-use Design | Traditional Knowledge | Architectural Documentation.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE
	Abstract	i
	Keywords	ii
	Table of Contents	iii
	List of Figures	v
	List of Tables	vii
	Glossary of Arabic Terms	viii
1	**Understanding the Context and Issues**	**1**
1.1	Research Introduction & Methodology	2
1.2	International Conventions Related to Authenticity and Historical Reconstruction	18
1.3	Scenarios on Built Heritage "Reconstruction"	26
2	**The Ancient City of Aleppo: Context, Damage, and Recovery**	**84**
2.1	Contextual Framework: The Historical and Urban Layers of Aleppo	84
2.2	Aleppo Ancient City Case Study	139
2.3	Action Area I: Taht al-Qal'a Urban Ensemble	152
2.4	Action Area II: Bayt Ajqbāsh — An Important War Remnant	166
3	**Conclusion**	**221**
3.1	From War Resolution to Post-War Reconstruction	222
3.2	Synthesis: Heritage as Process, Not Product	233
3.3	Architectural and Heritage Protection Principles for Aleppo	235
3.4	The Specific Case of Bayt Ajqbāsh	236
3.5	Limitations and Future Research	236
3.6	Final Reflection	237
4	**Appendix**	**239**
4.1	The New Sarāy	240

4.2	Al-Kusruwīyah Madrasat	244
4.3	Al-Sultānīyah Madrasat	250
4.4	Al-Hamīdīyah Hospital (Carlton Hotel)	255
4.5	Bayt Ajqbāsh	260
5	**References**	**268**

Glossary of Arabic Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
ABLAQ	Alternating colored stones
AL-'AJAMI	Wooden panels intricately painted with motifs and scenes
AL-MADINAT	Islamic City
AL-MALKAF	Model of ventilation known in Arab buildings
'ATABA	High platform in the entrance of the house
BĀB	Gate
BIMARISTAN	Hospital
DĀR AL-'ADL	Court of complaints or tribunal — the Palace of Justice
DIWAN	A high government ministry in various Islamic states
ḤAMMĀM	Bathroom
ĪWĀN	A rectangular hall, usually vaulted, walled on three sides, with one end entirely open to the courtyard
KARKŪZ W'WĀZ	Shadow play
KHĀNS	Caravanserais
KISHKS	Cantilevered wooden kiosks with transformable shutters
KITBIYYA	Wooden cabinet
MASHRABIYA	Carved wooden lattice screen or balcony window
MADRASAT	Islamic school
MASJID	Mosque

MASJID AL-KABĪR	Great Mosque
MĪHRĀB	Niche in the wall of a mosque, at the point nearest to Mecca
MUQARNAS	Three-dimensional ornamental architectural element in Islamic design
NA'IB	Deputy or Representative of Authority
QA'A	Roofed reception room found in domestic architecture of affluent residences
QUBBA	Domed structure in Islamic architecture
SARAY	Palace
SUQS	Markets
SYBAT	Architectural element (vaulted passage)
TABQ	Wooden boards covering the ceiling
TAHT AL-QAL'A	Area under the citadel
TAKIYYA	Travelers' lodge — public kitchen primarily used to feed travelers
TANNUR	Clay oven used for baking or cooking food
TAZAR	High platform in the reception room
WALI	Governor
ZUQAQ	Alley

Abbreviations

ABBREVIATION	MEANING
AKTC	Aga Khan Trust for Culture
AKHCP	Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme
DGAM	Directorate General of Antiquities & Museums
DSOCR	The Desired State of Conservation for the Removal of the Property from the list of World Heritage in Danger
GIS	Geographic Information System
GTZ	German Technical Cooperation

ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
ICCROM	International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
NGOS	Non-governmental organization
OUV	Outstanding Universal Value
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UN-HABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
WMF	World Monuments Fund
WWI	First World War — 1914 to 1918
WWII	Second World War — 1939 to 1945
WHL	World Heritage List
WHS	World Heritage Site

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Understanding the Context and Issues

This chapter establishes the theoretical and contextual foundation of the thesis. It begins with an introduction to the research problem—heritage as a victim of war—and presents the methodology, which integrates theoretical study, field study, analytical study, and comparative case analysis.

The chapter then examines international conventions related to authenticity and historical reconstruction, tracing the evolution of conservation doctrine from the Athens Charter (1931) and Venice Charter (1964) to the Nara Document (1994) and Riga Charter (2000). It explores how these principles are tested in post-war environments, where the need for psychological recovery, social cohesion, and identity restoration often justifies interventions that would be rejected in stable contexts.

The chapter analyzes global scenarios for built heritage reconstruction, grouping cases by strategic approach: faithful reconstruction, modernist replacement, ruin preservation, memorialization, and abusive replication. Case studies include Warsaw, Dresden, Florence, Cologne, the World Trade Center memorial, Oradour-sur-Glane, Gibellina, and the Buddhas of Bamiyan. The chapter extracts principles relevant to Aleppo.

A comparative analysis of two Syrian case studies—Crac des Chevaliers and the Triumphal Arch of Palmyra—concludes the chapter, highlighting the tension between consolidation and reconstruction in the Syrian context.

Chapter 2: The Ancient City of Aleppo — Case Study

This chapter presents the original research conducted by the candidate. It begins with the contextual framework: Aleppo's layered history of destruction and renewal, the Ottoman-period architectural baseline, and the evolution of conservation philosophy that led to World Heritage inscription in 1986.

The chapter then presents the case study properly, organized around two action areas:

Action Area I: The Taht al-Qal'a Urban Ensemble examines the area south of the Citadel, documenting damage to four significant monuments: the New Sarāy, Al-Kusruwīyah Madrasat, Al-Sultānīyah Madrasat, and Al-Hamīdīyah Hospital (Carlton Hotel). The chapter considers opportunities for urban recovery in this strategically important area.

Action Area II: Bayt Ajqbāsh offers a detailed analysis of an eighteenth-century house severely damaged in 2015. The analysis is structured in three parts: systematic damage assessment using satellite imagery, LiDAR, and photogrammetry; the ethical principles guiding intervention; and the practical restoration campaign (2019–2024). The chapter concludes with a proposal for adaptive reuse as a Center for Traditional Crafts and Architectural Heritage.

The chapter includes detailed appendices on each monument, with building research sheets documenting history, description, values, damage dates, damage assessment, and before/after photographs.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

This chapter returns to the three research questions posed in the introduction, synthesizing findings into a phased, context-sensitive recovery framework for Aleppo.

RQ1 (Challenges): The preservation of urban and built heritage in post-conflict cities is an endeavor of exceptional complexity. Challenges include the legacy of destruction, institutional and economic constraints, documentation deficiencies, and the challenge of competing values.

RQ2 (Solutions): The comprehensive review of historical and contemporary reconstruction cases reveals a spectrum of possible approaches. Rather than prescribing a single model, the thesis suggests that Aleppo's rehabilitation must draw selectively from multiple precedents, adapting their principles to local conditions and community values.

RQ3 (Documentation): Architectural documentation is not merely a technical preliminary to reconstruction but the very foundation upon which informed, ethical, and authentic rehabilitation must rest.

The chapter proposes six principles for Aleppo's recovery: Material Evidence, Documentary Fidelity, Spatial Continuity, Living Memory, Transparency, and Gradual Implementation. These principles are the candidate's original contribution.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on heritage as process, not product—the idea that Aleppo is a palimpsest of layers, each added by communities responding to their own needs, and that post-war reconstruction will become another layer in this long history.

Chapter 4: Appendix

The appendix contains building research sheets for each of the five monuments documented in the thesis: the New Sarāy, Al-Kusruwīyah Madrasat, Al-Sultānīyah Madrasat, Al-Hamīdīyah Hospital (Carlton Hotel), and Bayt Ajqbāsh.

Each sheet includes:

- Location, cadastral, and technical references
- Historical period and geographical coordinates
- Ground floor plan or first floor plan
- History of the building
- Description
- Values (architectural, artistic, historical, social, educational)
- Date of damage
- Damage assessment
- Damage mapping
- Before and after photographs

The appendix provides essential reference material for understanding the buildings, analyzing their damages, and planning future interventions.

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Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes five contributions to knowledge:

1. **Theoretical:** A framework for evaluating post-war reconstruction through the lenses of authenticity, community, and documentation.
2. **Methodological:** A multi-layered documentation model combining satellite imagery, LiDAR, photogrammetry, and archival research.
3. **Practical:** Principles and an adaptive reuse proposal for Aleppo's recovery, demonstrated through the Bayt Ajqbāsh case study.
4. **Comparative:** A structured comparison of Syrian case studies—Crac des Chevaliers and the Triumphal Arch of Palmyra.
5. **Contextual:** An insider perspective from thirty-five years at the DGAM, providing access and insight unavailable to external researchers.

The thesis also proposes actionable policy recommendations:

- Building Code Adaptation: Establish flexible municipal heritage bylaws for post-disaster structural consolidation.
- Artisan Guild Revival: Institutionalize vocational training programs in traditional stone carving and 'Ajami woodwork.
- Digital Archive Depository: Create a centralized, open-access 3D digital repository for Syrian historic monuments.

Final Reflection

The poem that opened this thesis spoke of a garden that became a forest of snakes—a world transformed by violence into something unrecognizable and threatening. For Aleppo, the task of recovery is not to pretend the snakes never came, nor to preserve only the memory of the garden, but to build a city that acknowledges both: the beauty that was destroyed and the violence that destroyed it.

Heritage reconstruction, done ethically, is not nostalgic. It is an act of continuity that the people of Aleppo remain the heirs of their history, even when that history includes wounds. The Ancient City cannot be restored to a pristine pre-war state, nor should it be. Its authenticity in the 21st century will lie in its ability to carry forward its layered past, including the scars of conflict, while making room for new life.

This thesis argued that such recovery is possible, but only through rigorous documentation, transparent intervention, community engagement, and principled adherence to international conservation standards adapted to local realities. Aleppo's future, like its past, will be built stone by stone, decision by decision, generation by generation.

Contact: lina4546@gmail.com

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