

**Pázmány Péter Catholic University**

**Doctoral School of History – Program of Archaeology**



**Noor Ghannoum**

**The Development of Church Architecture in Syria and its  
Modern Implications  
The Greek Orthodox Churches in Damascus**

Supervisors: Dr. Bartók István

Dr. Takács Miklós

Opponents: Dr. Adrienn Papp, PhD

Dr. Szécsi Zoltán, DLA

Budapest 2025

## **Introduction to Research**

Given the civilization roots of Christian Eastern culture, art, and architecture, Syria has played a conspicuous part in the formation of unique masterpieces since the inception of Early Christianity captures the attention of every researcher. On this land, the Christian religion began to spread through the fathers and apostles. Monasteries and churches are found in droves in each city, filled with theological and liturgical symbolism.


Keeping in mind that Syrian wealth of church architecture had taken center stage all over the world that demonstrated creativity and regeneration from different aspects, through its various ecclesiastical buildings: catacombs, house-churches, and several basilica forms, such as rectangular, cruciform, and centralized, in addition to its unique characteristics, like western twin towers, rectangular or semi-circular apses and decorative frames. All these components were constructed immaculately and placed in aesthetic, artistic forms and molds of church architecture. Hence, several factors contribute to creating this unique cultural fabric such as location, the nature of the patrimony environment, and historical events.

Church construction is one of the significant cultural and religious principles in the twenty-first century, especially in the history and development of local architecture having properties and features which are added to the historic recordings of church architecture. Hereunder are two main reasons leading to opting for this topic:

➤ Today in Syria, according to their religious affiliations and equality among the citizens, the government has the commitment to granting a plot of land in each new residential project for building both a mosque and a church. In the same vein, many Christian benefactors have the desire to donate money or even land as a contribution to building a church. At times, their home is offered to function as a church.

➤ Unfortunately, many Christians were displaced and fled from their country due to the unending war in Syria; from the countryside to the city, or even from one governorate to another. This exodus per se led to the re-classification and demographic distribution of the Christian structure. Despite the exodus, it should be noted that several Christian denominations currently exist in Syria to the present day.

Noteworthy, the estimated population in Syria in the year **2011** was:

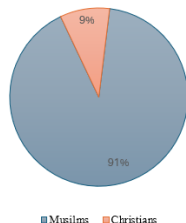
22,000000  1,900000; about **9%** Christian population.

On the other hand, in **2019**, the presence of Christians decreased to around **7%** in the wake of the Syrian crisis.

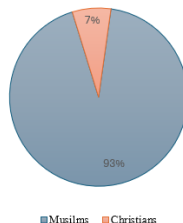
Based on these two reasons, whether available land or the Christian community's demographic distribution, Christians need to build or rebuild new churches. Building or reconstructing a church is an essential symbolic affair that attracts and takes part in creating a definition of the community and its implications. In addition, because of the lack of previous studies, the liturgy and symbolic approaches

of churches' structure should be taken into consideration, thus, it is one of the essential issues in this research.

Percentage of Christians in Syria in 2011



Percentage of Christians in Syria in 2019



A chart showing the percentage of Christians and Muslims in Syria in 2011 and 2019, by the author after (Fayyād, 2019)

Hence, it is imperative to study and comprehend the architectural development of churches in Syria. The ability to recognize what is the correlation between space, structure, and liturgy. The connection between the past and present in particular Greek Orthodox churches in Damascus, whether is it a complete reflection, are these churches compliant with liturgy and tradition and whether have they maintained or changed today. Despite the fact that Damascus is well-known for its great number of churches that belong to various Christian denominations, the Greek Orthodox churches in Damascus are taken as a case study in the research.

The selection of Damascus city and Greek Orthodox churches is based on several key reasons, outlined as follows:

- The seat of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East is situated in Damascus (Mariamite Cathedral of Damascus).

- Damascus is considered a comprehensive city that embraces a significant presence of Christian denominations. Furthermore, in the past, the presence of the Greek Orthodox denomination was concentrated in major cities such as Damascus, also still today the significant attendance of this Christian denomination has a clear impact on the city compared to other cities.
- Damascus features a considerable number and variety of churches belonging to the Greek Orthodox denomination, dating back to various historical periods such as model churches, Damascene churches, house churches and modern ones.
- By and large, the Greek Orthodox denomination represents a great presence compared to Christian denominations. The architectural style of their church preserves its theological identity as a Byzantine church, notwithstanding geographical, cultural, and social diversity. Thus, the Byzantine church has a distinct image that may be recognized in many countries such as Cyprus, Greece, and Syria especially the city of Antioch. Over time, however, some influences emerged in several churches that would be dealt with later in Damascus.

In the end, this research endeavors to achieve such a balanced formula that helps architects to build new churches and create a space full of the knowledge of the Greek Orthodox churches.

### **Importance of Research**

Church architecture is a series of interrelated and well-connected episodes. Each episode unravels the previous one and represents a base for the next episode. Which is all based on the principle of theological doctrine, symbolism, faith and liturgical rite. Thus, it is essential to shed light on our Christian Ecclesiastical heritage in Syria. This is rich historically and culturally and has produced a unique intellectual and scientific architecture.

The importance of this research is demonstrated by the underlying two main aspects:

- **The architectural aspect:**

All in all, ecclesiastical architecture is closely related to the spiritual and liturgical theology in addition to the connection of form to content. Every detail or part of the Church has taken the meaning and symbol of Christianity with its liturgical and architectural dimension, not like any rigid residential building.

Accordingly, the significance of the research lies in the importance of the essence of the Church that is embodied in the form and how the architect understands such concepts. The close connection lies between the architects and their concept of the church, its form, how to link the elements of the church according to historical origin and preservation. Hence, this research will help any architect to create an area of knowledge and awareness of their commitment to patterns of liturgical and architectural meanings. Additionally, it aims to foster, raise awareness, and educate architects in the design of church construction, while maintaining and keeping the form of

Ecclesiastical art during renovation. This methodology is meant for those architects who want to design a new church of the Greek Orthodox respecting theology, liturgy, and symbolism to understand the idea and basic elements of church design.

- **The Christian community aspect:**

Christianity represents an essential part of the history and the social composition of the Eastern community. Over the centuries, it has impacted intellectually, spiritually and socially wise. Christian art gives a symbol to thought and simultaneously a meaning. This research bears in its awareness, academic, sociocultural, religious, and scientific dimensions, the importance of the role of the Church in the Christian community. In addition, the importance of research lies in preserving the oriental tradition and maintaining the historical Christian identity in Syria.

### **Objective of Research**

- At its core, this research aims to find a clear and specific strategy based on the Church's thought and the Orthodox theology to build a model church away from any personal opinions or deviations that do not serve the spiritual or theological dimension or the identity of the Greek Orthodox denomination.

The intention is to reach a formula compatible, balanced and satisfactory in terms of a clear sequence of requirements of the foundations of the past and the present, and the extent of association and reflection of the past and the present in church architecture. In other words, it suggests creating a balance between modernization

and the authenticity of ancient churches, through structures closer to tradition. Moreover, this may assist architects in creating contemporary church architecture that is theologically connected and has historical and cultural extension.

- Additionally, through the methodology of the research, it should be a reference in the form of a booklet or a simple reference in the Diocese or the Patriarchate about how to build or design a contemporary Greek Orthodox church in a manner compatible with the liturgy and preserve the ancient design in the construction of churches.
- Above all, in the wake of the Syrian crisis, this research could form a general microcosm of ancient church heritage and present ones as a simple tiny part of the documentation.

### **Research Questions**

- What would be the most important elements that should be respected and linked to the traditions; Syrian sanctuary, western towers, iconostasis? Is there a continuity between these elements over the centuries? Are they relevant today? Can we define rules, tools, guidelines, stylistic criteria, or strategies, when designing a contemporary church of the Greek Orthodox based on those examples?
- Why and how were the Greek Orthodox churches built in Damascus in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? What are the reasons for the decline in church architectural heritage?

- How is the ideal model of the church building of the Greek Orthodox shown today?
- What are the factors to assess in this model?
- Does the architectural design have a significant and fundamental impact on how the Christian community perceives churches?

### **Problem of Research**

Today, church architecture's flourishing has ceased and declined after taking center stage in Syria's Christian history. There is a lack of guidelines during the construction of a church and has not been taken into account, leading to the loss of part of our cultural identity, architectural and symbolic aspects. In other words, the traditional forms are not adhered to in many churches in the modern era as in Damascus. In Greek Orthodox churches, the traditions (Παράδοση Paradosi) is a matter that equals the theological and dogmatic commitments and has spiritual, symbolic, and functional meanings. Hence, the problem lies in comprehending these meanings and the substantial issues of designing the church in the present day.

An apparent negligence of authenticity and preservation in many churches belonging to the Greek Orthodox denomination is shown in Damascus. However, there are several attempts to retain traditions and heritage by creating a bridge between the ancient and modern churches in many cities in Syria such as Latakia.

### **Difficulties and challenges**

One of the key challenges the researcher has experienced is the difficulty of obtaining and collecting information and documents for churches, especially in the case of the Greek Orthodox community in Damascus, whether through the engineering offices or the real estate office in the Patriarchate. Another daunting challenge one must endure is the lack of interest in engineering archives, including architectural and construction plans. This is reflected negatively on any research processes needed (conservation, restoration) for the church. Although such plans and documentation are accessible at times, they are merely prior to modification (revamping, restoration, and so on).

## **Methodology**

In gaining access to the objective of the research, the approach of research is divided into:

- Descriptive method: It represents the theoretical side.
  - This method depends on the references, previous studies, and books that are relevant architecturally, liturgically, and historically in the development of church architecture starting from the early Christian period of Syrian churches.
  - This also covers the Byzantine period from the fourth to the sixth centuries, besides the Crusader period between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.
  - Moreover, it exhibits the church architecture of Christian denominations in old Damascus and the contemporary ones of the

Greek Orthodox denomination in Damascus. Needless to mention, there is a lack of sources.

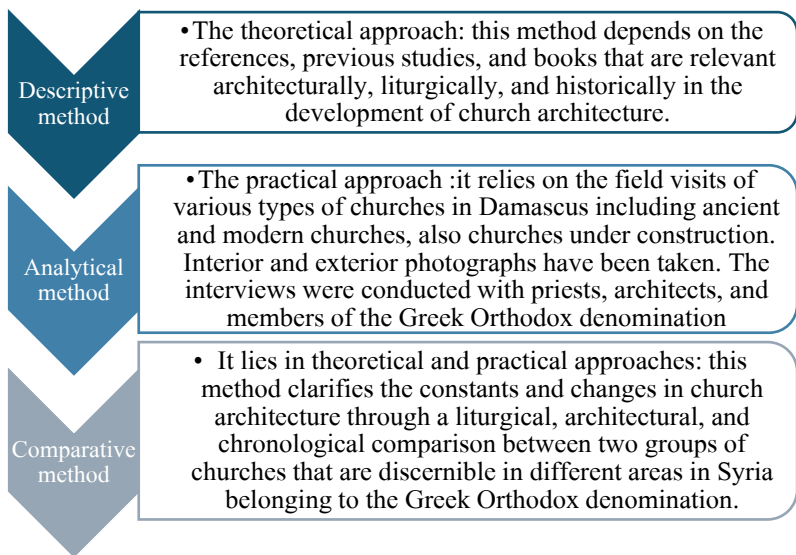
➤ Analytical method: It lies in the practical side.

- It shows the analytics and justifications for the emergence of ancient and modern church models, as well as their liturgical and architectural aspects.

- In addition, it relies on the field visits of various types of churches in Damascus including ancient and modern churches, also churches under construction. Interior and exterior photographs have been taken. The interviews were conducted with priests, architects, and members of the Greek Orthodox denomination who pray in the churches, how they feel during practicing rituals, and their point of view about churches as a structure.

➤ Comparative method:

This method clarifies the constants and changes in church architecture through a liturgical, architectural, and chronological comparison between two groups of churches that are discernible in different areas in Syria belonging to the Greek Orthodox denomination. Damascus, Lattakia, and Daraa cities were selected for studying church architecture dating back to different historical periods from the ancient and early modern ages until nowadays.



A graphic illustration depicting three types of methodologies, by the author

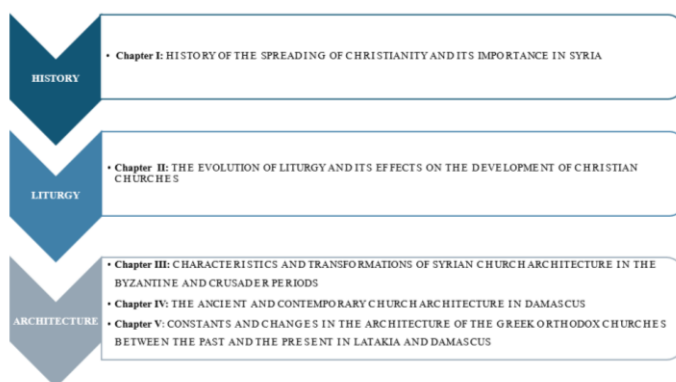
### **Contribution to Knowledge**

Most of the studies that were carried out despite their small number included the study of modern churches with their denominations or a study of the architectural developments of the churches during a certain time frame of the Byzantine period (comparisons between the north and the south of Syria), or the selection of one church with restoration and rehabilitation or regeneration. Parts of these studies discuss liturgy alone, while others investigate art independently, or architecture in isolation from the liturgical and symbolic dimensions.

This research focuses on examining the architectural development of church architecture over time, up to the present day, by highlighting key architectural models, with a particular emphasis on Greek

Orthodox churches. This study provides an in-depth examination of Greek Orthodox church architecture, tracing its historical origins in Syria to the present day. It prioritizes the scientific and academic dimensions of the architectural topic, focusing on detailed description, analysis, and comparative analysis.

The culmination of this work, presented as an academic summary, elucidates the interrelationship among all elements, highlighting and affirming the strong link between the symbolism of ecclesiastical liturgy and its architectural dimension.



A graphic illustration that outlines the study chapters, highlighting the historical, liturgical, and architectural aspects, and demonstrating the connections between them

## **Conclusion**

This comprehensive study of the development of church architecture includes scientific and academic aspects of architectural and liturgical issues in terms of description, analysis, and comparison,

and specializes in the Greek Orthodox denomination, generally in Syria and specifically in Damascus. On the other hand, in order to investigate the church building activity of the recent past and today, the research is based on field visits to various types of churches and interviews conducted with priests, architects, and members of the Greek Orthodox denomination. Based on this, hereunder are key points to building a new church of the Greek Orthodox denomination today.

- In Christianity, liturgy and symbolism are foundational to church architecture, every element of a church carries symbolic meaning and serves liturgical requirements, which is reflected in the architectural design. such as orientation towards the east, The external form of the church constitutes a second crucial aspect, encompassing various plan types such as rectangular, centralized, and cruciform plans. Each of these forms embodies both symbolic and functional approaches.

- Observations indicate that the western towers have transitioned from functional elements to predominantly aesthetic features. In conclusion, reviving these towers could be advantageous, provided it is feasible and aligns with practical considerations.

- In Addition, the traditional semicircular apse should be preserved as a distinctive external feature of the church.

It would be advantageous to use architectural elements from the Syrian church architecture in the Byzantine period mentioned above, such as arched windows, the apse, dome roofs, and gable roofs, into

modern designs where practical, thereby linking simply the heritage of Syrian church architecture. Drawing from this research, the Mariamite Cathedral of Damascus, the Holy Cross Church in Damascus, and Saint Andrew Church in Latakia can be regarded as models of church architecture that successfully fulfilled most of the architectural criteria and liturgical requirements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

- Hence, despite undergoing numerous restorations and reconstructions, the Mariamite Cathedral of Damascus exemplifies a deep connection between architectural heritage and the contemporary approach. This careful balance renders the cathedral a compelling demonstration of how architectural traditions can endure and adapt, creating a space that respects both its historic roots and its modern function as a place of worship.

- The design of the Holy Cross Church in Damascus exemplifies historical basilica elements. This is accomplished through the utilization of essential and practical elements of the church and modern materials.

- Saint Andrew in Latakia serves as another model by integrating historical elements with contemporary design. The proposed design, incorporating western towers and a gable roof, achieves a harmonious blend of historical and modern styles.

This study highlights that the authentic value of heritage is more apparent in areas farther from old Damascus, such as Latakia, where it has been preserved with greater integrity despite the challenges and economic crises in the recent past and today.

These churches demonstrate how architectural church designs can create successful connections with historical churches. The churches unite traditional architectural components such as domes and gable roofs and basilica plans, semicircular apses and iconostases with modern requirements and design elements. The architectural designs represent reinterpretations that both respect historical precedents and meet the needs of contemporary liturgical and community functions. The churches unite eternal architectural elements to form sacred spaces that connect their historical significance with modern-day importance, thus serving as exemplary models for church architecture.

- One significant challenge in constructing new Greek Orthodox churches, particularly in densely populated cities like Damascus, is the scarcity of suitable land. The limited size of available plots often dictates the church's design, sometimes requiring deviations from traditional forms and orientations.

Furthermore, financial constraints are another obstacle. The Greek Orthodox Church relies on donations from the Christian community due to the Patriarchate's limited resources. While the Patriarchate contributes to the construction process alongside donors, the restricted budget can lead to delays or compromises in completing the project. It is important to emphasize that the decision on the church building is based on sharing between the diocese and the architect in a compatible manner with guidelines to serve the church architecture. Thus, there is a need to set up a committee consisting of bishops and architects who are specialists and experts in ecclesiastical art and

architecture. Hence, they are aware of the principal issues and can guide the processing of church building to accomplish these matters in accordance with the liturgy, tradition and pastoral considerations. Thus, the final decision in carrying out the church is made by the diocese and this committee and is unrelated merely to a donor.

### **Publication list**

- **Published in 2022:**

Constants and Changes of Syrian Ecclesiastical Architecture of the Greek Orthodox between the Past and the Present.

[https://dok.ptc.hu/sites/dok.ptc.hu/files/files/Kiadvanyok/IDK2021\\_Tanulmanykotet\\_tomoritett.pdf](https://dok.ptc.hu/sites/dok.ptc.hu/files/files/Kiadvanyok/IDK2021_Tanulmanykotet_tomoritett.pdf)

ISBN: 978-963-429-819-9

Page:629-645

- **Accepted and under publication for 2020-2023:**

Loss of Tradition and Identity of Icon Painting and its Impact on Damascene Churches in the Nineteenth Century.

To be published during 2023 in Volume I of Studies in the Near Eastern Archeology to be published by the Institute of Archeology of PPKE.

- **Accepted and under publication for 2023:**

The Ancient and Contemporary Ecclesiastical Architecture of the Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus.

To be published during 2023 in Volume I of Studies in the Near Eastern Archeology to be published by the Institute of Archeology of PPKE.

## BIO

Noor Ghannoum is a Syrian architect who graduated from the Faculty of Architecture at Aleppo University in 2011. Shortly after, she joined the Free Line Group in Aleppo, where she specialized in 3D modeling for architectural and interior design projects (2011–2012).

From 2013 to 2017, she worked with the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums. In this role, she focused on documenting historical buildings and their restoration processes within a specialized database. During this period, she also collaborated with UNESCO on the CyArk project, which involved advanced 3D documentation and visualization of cultural heritage sites.

In 2017, she was awarded a scholarship to Hungary, where she began her doctoral studies in architecture. Her research focuses on the development of church architecture in Syria, with a particular emphasis on the Damascus region. In 2021, she further expanded her research and professional skills through an academic internship for doctoral students from Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME) and Pázmány Péter Catholic University at Narmer Studio.

More recently, she has worked with DKD Kft in Dorog, Hungary, and currently serves as an architect at János Kórház. Her professional practice continues to integrate expertise in both architectural design and the preservation of historic buildings.

