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Post conflict conservation or reconstruction: analysis, criteria, values of the recent Syrian cultural heritage

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Abstract

Three years of conflict in Syria has affected the cultural heritage severely and threatened social and symbolic values. This paper illustrates firstly the real condition of the city of Aleppo, through presenting some cases of high cultural value buildings damaged by the conflict, even some were totally collapsed, which represent an important bond of Aleppo citizens similar to the idea of “Istanza Psicologica” theorized by Roberto Pane. Secondly, the research aims to analyze the criteria of “second-day” intervention (conservation, restoration, enhancement and eventual reconstruction) on this damaged heritage, by investigating the cultural significant values of these buildings damaged or completely destroyed. Finally, the paper concludes with a few suggestions about the optimum intervention of different case studies represents the values mentioned before.

To sum up, the research aims to involve the international debate about conservation and restoration with a critical situation of cultural heritage in crisis.

Keywords: Syrian heritage, traditional architecture, reconstruction, war damage, architectural preservation

Introduction

For more than three years Aleppo has been witnessing painful events that have negatively affected the lives of all the citizens as well as all sectors including the built heritage sector. Many of old monuments and areas have been subject to damage and destruction, the Citadel and other historical buildings that are significant, not only in the history of Syria but also in the history of mankind, have been affected, as well. Reports show that till November 2013, more than 53% of the Old

City of Aleppo was destroyed¹ and a number of 113 different monuments were partially or totally damaged in the same period. This represents an enormous loss not only for the Syrian country but also for the international community, which gave little attention to these facts. The only main initiatives taken to protect and reinforce the common sense about this heritage are represented by few papers and the constitution of a “No strike list”². Investigating these cultural scenarios, the most important initiative was the UNESCO decision to declare Aleppo a “*world heritage site in danger*”, which means to move it to the World Heritage List in danger, trying, through this action, to sense the experts worldwide. This action, however, had only bureaucratic and symbolic results, with no real effect on the field: on the contrary, it gave, recently, a negative effect. The extremist revolts, in fact, after this “international recognizing of value” decided to destroy the Holy Shrines of Aleppo famous religious figures³, other sides responded by destroying other sites. The study, nevertheless, is not focusing on the destruction caused by one side of the Syrian conflict, but it aims to have a holistic overview of Aleppo heritage as a result of this crisis and creating the base for a deeper overview of this damaged landscape. Starting with these facts, the paper aims to present the recent situation of Aleppo heritage during this crisis by showing different examples and case studies in order to involve the international community of experts in the study, understanding and protection of this patrimony and also in the future intervention of conservation and reconstruction.

Destruction: cause and effect

In the complex condition of the Syrian conflict, it seems difficult to classify the destruction and the damages occurred in Aleppo, but the paper tries to do that, depending on the motivations which generated those damages, caused by all the participants in the conflict for different reasons. It is

possible to identify five causes with at least one main example which may explain in a better way not only the theoretical reasons of the damage but also show real effects on the built heritage and the consecutive people's psychological affection to it. Each cause (reason?) will be associated with a specific word to summarize complex proceeding with short ideas: one of the paper's main goal, in fact, it is represented not only by the will to classify all the reasons occurred, but also to underline the huge difference between them. This main difference, in fact, it will constitute a base for the future methodology about the intervention of heritage conservation or reconstruction, trying to consider the damage reasons as an integrated part of the conservation plan. The first cause is punishment, where each party of the conflict tries to punish his "enemies" by destroying their properties. As the case of Aleppo covered Bazar (*souq*) shows, rebels have set it into the fire⁴ to punish the merchants of Aleppo for not supporting the revolution. The will to destroy this particular monument shows the intention to punish a specific part of the society: merchants. This bazar, in fact, was the active heart of trade activities of the most industrial and commercial city of the nation, not an archaeological site for tourism visits and study. It was one of the biggest covered bazaars in the world from the Ottoman Empire era, and the longest historical one in the world survived until the start of the conflict⁵. So, burning it represents the rebel's intention to involve in the conflict new social classes, forcing them to participate in the fighting. It moved the conflict into a new level: before it was a conflict between two different sides and after it among the citizens and their identity was involved.

Another reason/cause is related to accidental destruction, which happened mistakenly by the army forces intended to bomb fighter's shelters and, instead of that, hit an important monument: this happened when the Syrian air force through barrel bombs on the Old City quarters and destroyed the

Old municipality of Aleppo⁶, which was built on 1916, with Ottoman style and rich ornaments, and its particular entrance with the winged stairs and the clock over it. In juxtaposition with the previous example, this fact did not represent a symbolic message to the people, but just another loss in the important city heritage and its aesthetic landscape.

The remained causes are all related to symbolic values. The need to divide this group of concepts shows the crisis complexity, explaining the whole different values and psychological relations to heritage, though destruction and conflict may affect different aspects and sectors of Aleppians. Destroying a city's symbolic figure, related and connected with peoples identity and their image about the city is functional to motivate them to act with or against other actions and deeds. For example, the destruction of Aleppo Umayyad Great Mosque Minaret by the rebels, with its huge emotional and historical value, and accusing the Syrian army with that demolition aimed to push the people to support the rebels and show the government forces as criminals. On the other side, the army targeted mosques and minarets in order to affect the rebel's spirit by showing them the will to destroy the cradle of revolt, where everything has started.

One group of symbolic destruction is reflected by religious motivation. Even if the demonstration movements in Syria started peacefully, demanding a more democrat and open country⁷, lately all the manifestations started to be guided by different motivations, like the religious ones, and shortly conduct to a civil war. The religious motivation, however, constitutes one of the main reasons which generate the war and gave birth to many different groups who started to fight and persuade the opponent to leave the battle and join their religion/cause. The primary tool to achieve this objective it was represented by the destruction of religious symbols of their challengers, as ISIL⁸ and Nosra frontier⁹ destroyed many shrines of religious figures of Aleppo history¹⁰. They



Destructions in Aleppo city, 2014



The ruins of the past heritage

consider those shrines as a symbol of infidelity, and by their point of view, this is one of the reasons delaying their victory, while the destruction of the Syrian troops for the mosques and minarets is another example. Obviously, beyond the groups which decide to fight for religious reasons, choosing to represent a whole faith with violence, all the civil people not involved directly in the conflict but related to that specific religion suffer a tremendous shock from the damage of their religious most important symbols. The impact of this heritage loss, in fact, has consequences not in the built landscape of Aleppo city only, but also in the mind of all the devotees in the world, which feel the bereavement caused by the conflict. Another part of symbolic destruction is related to the concept of history denial, where each side tries to eliminate a part of the city's history considered as a period to forget about, characterized by bad episodes and facts. The attack of the Citadel of Aleppo¹¹ and the destruction of its entrance¹² by the rebels aimed to delete the image of power and dictatorship-era of the Syrian government and represents the main case study of this idea of symbolic destruction. The rebels, damaged part of the monument because it represents a military base in which the national forces used to repair themselves instead of one of the most important monuments of defensive Arab Architecture. This fact constitutes an element which may testify how the conflict reasons have already overtaken the cultural and historical ones, and till which point all the opponents are ready to arrive and what are disposed to sacrifice to defend their motivations. This attitude regards both sides, in fact, on the other hand, the governmental troops destroyed any symbol or site could form in the future evidence of what happened, or glorifies the activists' acts. This reason transforms the ideal group which we are discussing about, extending the meaning of it: if the first example is referred to the 'history denial' as the will to destroy symbols of the past, the national army attitude is focused to delete the symbols

of the future or anything which may constitute an evidence of what's happening now. These tendencies urged the people of Aleppo to try to do something to protect their city's symbol, the Citadel, especially after the usage of explosive tunnels technique to destroy the national Hospital historical building¹³, and the Justice palace¹⁴ just in front of the Citadel. These facts originate a popular initiative which involves a lot of Aleppo citizen in the protection of the urban landscape. The citizens started a campaign on social media sites called *Save Aleppo*¹⁵ with the conviction to sensitive all the media and all the people in the heritage protection and to establish a web of "civil surveillance" on the monuments.

In general, those four causes and their effects gave the feeling to Aleppo people that their identity is targeted, and systematic destruction is conducted in their city and their heritage, in order to defeat their feeling of belonging and pride, as a personal punishment for their behaviour during the conflict years¹⁶. In addition to that a sense of international conspiracy (either by participating in this destruction or by neglecting and no action policy) is recently prevailing among Aleppo citizens: for them, those countries' goal is to steal their artefacts and to strip them of their history to show that they are uncivilized and savage society. Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General¹⁷, said as «Damage to cultural heritage is a blow against the identity and history of the Syrian people. It is a blow against the universal heritage of humanity». Those words show the attention and concern expressed by the international experts, even if their support isn't followed by concrete action on the damaged sites. Even if the conflict now doesn't allow to start a general reconstruction/conservation plan (with the idea of Aleppo decision-maker to rebuild everything as it was before the conflict¹⁸) it seems important to analyze few case studies, in order to understand the problem complexity and peculiarity, and it's essential to suggest different strategies for future intervention too. These suggestions, however, should

embrace different international experiences and knowledge to work as a guideline for the reconstruction plan.

Case studies

The aforementioned examples and cases were chosen depending on their symbolic meaning to Aleppo citizens. To achieve the goal of measuring that influence the study would suggest exploiting many different tools useful to evaluate the significance of each monument, like the value engineering measuring systems such as Delphi or CIA (Cross Impact Analysis). However, those methodologies are thought for “peacetime”, and their application during a conflict constitutes a difficult research’s starting point. So, the paper proposes a new analysis configuration, depending on a new emerging tool which may be helpful to the data collection and gave a hint about the situation and influences of heritage destruction on people’s emotions. Using new instrument and a new strategy means to measure the people’s interaction through web and, especially, social media (such as Facebook or Twitter), websites and the number of pages and hashtags about one monument or event in the Syrian conflict long period¹⁹. The data coming out by these analyses could be helpful in the future of reconstruction and intervention strategies to understand the real value of each monument and building to define priorities before taking a decision about the best intervention methodology in each site. It is important to combine these tools in order to invent a suitable modern instrument takes into consideration all criteria and factors before planning the strategy of future intervention. In this paper, the research aims to present just a few selected case studies, in order to explain each classification group: for each one of them, the present study will give an interpretation and a monument symbolic affection, coming out from the data analysis, and a suggestion for the future intervention on

the heritage, in order to maintain the memory and the site's cultural values.

Values and importance

For briefness reasons, the study presents the case studies (selected as mentioned before) in the same order as they were quoted before. In fact, the reason for their damage still represents the starting point for any real evaluation or to form any suggestion or guideline for future intervention.

The Main Bazar (covered Souq)²⁰ returns to the 4th century A.D where the shops constructed on the sides of the straight street between Antakia gate and the Citadel of Aleppo. Besides its historical importance, it has a commercial value since when it became the main market of Aleppo after it was burned in the 18th century during the Ottoman empire. The goods sold in these markets in the past²¹ do not represent the only main souq's importance: in the recent days, it was the main supplier of goods of Aleppo city and near suburbs, even to cities like Raqqa and Deir Ezzour in the East, Latakia and Idleb on the West. The importance of the market is enforced by the presence and magnificence of its heritage (caravansaries, mosques, minarets, *takaia*²²) special and unique buildings. Built-in 1916²³, a late Ottoman edifice housed the city hall of Aleppo (Municipality Building). It is one of numerous beautiful late Ottoman-period buildings surrounding the Citadel, constructed with heavy European architectural influence. Full of ornaments with a cornice, and splendid entrance with a clock over it. The stone winged stairs and the compact shape made it a unique example of Aleppo Architecture from this era. For a while, the Municipality Building housed the Aleppo passport and immigration office - where tourists once queued up to extend their visas. The passport office has relocated elsewhere, leaving the building vacant awaiting its restoration. But unfortunately, it was damaged severely on 28 September 2012 during the conflict.



The Umayyad and the Omari mosque and the Minaret

Aleppo Citadel is a large medieval fortified castle in the centre of the Old City of Aleppo²⁴. It is considered to be one of the oldest and largest castles in the world. Usage of the Citadel hill dates back at least to the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. Subsequently, it was occupied by many civilizations including Greeks, Byzantines, Ayyubids and Mamluks. The majority of the construction as it stands today is thought to originate from the Ayyubid period²⁵. Extensive conservation work has taken place in the last decade by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture²⁶ in collaboration with Aleppo Archeological Society²⁷. Besides its extraordinary architectural and historical value, it has a symbolic value for the people of Aleppo, it is the symbol of their city and almost in every logo there. The area around the Citadel was one of the most active zones, not only for tourist but also for the inhabitants of the city. The main square in front of the Citadel was a theatre for many carnivals and cultural activities, and it was also surrounded by cafés and restaurants, cultural and entertainment centres. Referring to the Umayyad mosque and its minaret²⁸, Helga Seeden, a professor of archaeology at the American University of Beirut said “*this is like blowing up the Taj Mahal or destroying the Acropolis in Athens. This mosque is a living sanctuary. This is a disaster. In terms of heritage, this is the worst I’ve seen in Syria. I’m horrified*”²⁹ The minaret’s shaft, which protruded out of the flat roof of one of the halls, consisted of five levels with a crowning top encircled with a veranda. A muqarnas-style cornice divided the veranda top from the shaft. The structure was largely built of fine ashlar. The minaret was heavily decorated in relief ornament, more so than any other Islamic-era structure in Aleppo. Its stories contained cusped arches and continuous mouldings.

According to E.J. Brill’s *First Encyclopedia of Islam*³⁰, the minaret was “*quite unique in the whole of Muslim architecture*” Archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld described the architectural style of the minaret as being “*the product of*

Mediterranean civilization” writing that its four facades carried elements of Gothic architecture. The minaret value came from the huge value of the mosque itself, and after the restoration in 2007 with the big debates between experts; it had a scientific value for the restoration experts of Syria as an experimental try by local experts. The huge value added to the minaret was after its first attack time during the conflict and the great sorrow and sadness after it was bombed and destroyed completely.

Conclusions

All those monuments are now in danger, we suggest to adopt strategies guided and inspired with previous international experience. Starting from refusing the idea of rebuilding the heritage as it was before the conflict and inventing other solutions in comparison with similar international cases.

The first strategy (memorializing) aims to conserve the ruins as a memory of the past keeping the monument as it was after the destruction³¹ and surround it by a memorial park which may empathize the importance of it and remind the future generations about the conflict tragedy. The A-Dome case in Hiroshima³², represents a perfect match to this intention, conserving the ruins of the main city monument in the middle of a new park which is designed to involve the inhabitants and the tourists with the past. Another solution (mixing), aims to mix the conservation needs to the will to reinvent the heritage through new technologies, aim to complete the demolished ruins with new materials showing the meeting of two styles and ages. The worldwide known Berlin’s Reichstag case³³, for example, constitutes a masterpiece of this solution, reaching the goal to add the original damaged monument (the old German Parliament) to new techniques and material (a new dome cover made by glass and steel with energetic requests) adding symbolic values of it (roof transparency, clean institutions). Even if the study already expresses how a

complete reconstruction of *all* the demolished heritage denotes a lack of ideas and guidelines, it is possible to configure a possibility of rebuild part of the damaged heritage³⁴. This indication (reconstructing) aspires to overtake the past tragedy through a complete reconstruction of the symbols of the past. The Mostar bridge, for example, represents an attempt to reconstruct not only the lost heritage but also to refind the culture of the past (destroyed in the so-called *urbicide*³⁵, which delete all the cultural values and symbols). Finally, the last possibility for the intervention on the damaged heritage is represented by the will to delete the past history by building new monuments for the future. This attitude (designing), even if is often related to feeble memorializing instances, points to create a new future, building it on the ruins of the lost damaged heritage. The New York World Trade Center for instance, constitutes a symbol of this attitude, choosing to construct, in the same area, a new building characterized by a new style, form and materials³⁶. This, even if the project is provided by a space dedicated to the memory of the terroristic attack, it may signify the will to reject the past and go beyond the tragedy.

Those examples show the importance of international experience and its contribution to future intervention in Aleppo after the conflict. It's important to start as soon as possible, a debate between international experts about the best way to help the local ones and the decision-makers to explain how to act after the end of the conflict instead of waiting its end. These strategies may change the idea diffused nowadays prevailing now in Syria (*never forgive, never forget*) into a new one (*forgive but never forget*) about the intervention in the heritage of Aleppo, by combining the memories of the past with the memories of the conflict to construct a new future for next generations.

Notes

- 1 M. ABDULKARIM, *The Archaeological Heritage in Syria during the Crisis, General*, Directorate of Antiquities & Museums, Damascus, 2013., p. 42.
- 2 It is a list of geographic areas, complexes, or installations not planned for capture or destruction, Heritage for Peace and Blue Shield, in full consultation with Syrian colleagues, have prepared a list of the twenty most important archaeological and historical sites in Aleppo for use by all sides in the conflict.
<http://www.heritageforpeace.org/>
- 3 For example, personality as Abo Alhasan one of the Prophet's companions, or Abu Alhuda Alsiadi the former head of Sufi religious group and, later on, Mufti of Muslim religion.
<http://www.tajdeed.org.uk/ar/posts/list/9888.page>
- 4 On October 2nd 2012.
- 5 The Aleppo Bazar was 15 Km long and included 37 different sectors.
- 6 On September 28th 2012.
- 7 Even the government admitted that, the president Assad in his speech to the Syrian parliament (10 June 2012)
- 8 Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.
- 9 Alnosra frontier, Al-Qaida branch in Syria.
- 10 Awais Alqurani, and other companions of the Prophet Mohammed.
- 11 J. GONNELLA, *The Citadel of Aleppo: Description, History, Site Plan and Visitor Tour*, 2nd Ed., 2008, Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Syrian Directorate, General of Antiquities and Museums., p. 45-52.
- 12 On 08th August 2012, by the Syrian free Army (Rebels).
- 13 On 08th May 2014, with a tunnel under it filled with 750 tons of explosives, by the rebels.
- 14 On 07th Feb 2014.
- 15 About this argument it seems very important to remember the initiative of website The creative memory of the Syrian Revolution ([http://www.creativememory.org/?p=54252.](http://www.creativememory.org/?p=54252)) which states: *<The promoters of this project believe that it participates in the documentation of contemporary history, so it is crucial that the revolution and its realities are explicitly described, for the coming generations, for the whole world.>*
- 16 M. Hrietani, in his presentation *Challenges for Old City of Aleppo in the time of war* at Aleppo University, 21th March 2013.
- 17 <https://news.vice.com/article/syria-s-cultural-heritage-is-a-major-victim-of-the-country-s-civil-war>
- 18 This intention is already expressed by different personality like Aleppo Major and Municipal in accordance to the Prime Minister declaration on October 2013.

19 This strategy to analyze the psychological affection of Aleppo people to their heritage was chosen for multiple reasons. First of all, a more common sociological surveys (like interviews or questionnaires) are not available to be applied in a city in conflict for the evident lack of users and the resulting unreliable data. So, the study decided to analyze all the data coming out from the social media, because it may represent now the only reliable element we can work with. So, all the paper strategies and the efforts are related to the USIP's Center of Innovation in Science, Technology and Peacebuilding (<http://www.usip.org/olivebranch/google-facebook-microsoft-eye-syria-social-media-data-trends>) and the "Blog&Bullets" initiative hosted at the Stanford University in 2013 (<http://www.usip.org/publications/blogs-bullets>).

20 M. CHIBLI, *The City of Aleppo: Room for Rehabilitation*, in <Medina Issue Eleven: Architecture, Interiors & Fine Arts> edited by British Virgin Islands: Medina Magazine, n. January/February 2000, pp. 52-53.

21 During the Ottoman empire in one day was equal to those sold in Damascus and Cairo in a month S. S. CANTACUZINO, *Aleppo: Bab El Faraj*, in <Mimar 12: Architecture in Development> edited by Hasan-Uddin Khan, Singapore, Concept Media Ltd., 1984, p. 132; A. QUDSI, *Aleppo: A Struggle for Conservation*, in <Mimar 12: Architecture in Development> edited by Hasan-Uddin Khan, Singapore, Concept Media Ltd., 1984, p. 92.

22 The *takia* (plural *takaia*) is a common building in Aleppo city. Built to host and feed poor people and travelers who can't afford an hotel, *takia* represents today an important part of the city's heritage.

23 A.R. MOBAYYED, , *Aleppo monuments, ministry of culture, Damascus, Syria*, 2007, p. 231.

24 The Citadel represent the center also for the motivation that inscribe the Old City in the world Heritage List in 1986. S. BIANCA, *Medieval Citadels Between East and West*, edited by Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2007, Milan, p. 65.

25 The Ayyubid dynasty was a Muslim dynasty of Kurdish origin, founded by Saladin and centered in Egypt. The dynasty ruled much of the Middle East during the 12th and 13th centuries (1171 established – 1341 disestablished) A. QUDSI, *Aleppo: A Struggle for Conservation*, in <Mimar 12: Architecture in Development> edited by Hasan-Uddin Khan, Singapore, Concept Media Ltd., 1984, p. 67

26 The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) focuses on the physical, social, cultural and economic revitalization of communities in the Muslim world. It includes the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the Aga Khan Historic Cities Program, the Aga Khan Music Initiative, the on-line resource ArchNet.org and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture

at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The Museums & Exhibitions unit coordinates the development of a number of museum and exhibition projects.

27 P. JODIDIO, *The Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme, Strategies for urban regeneration*, Edited by Prestel, 2011, pp. 248-253; J. GONNELLA, *Columns and Hieroglyphs: Magic Spolia in Medieval Islamic Architecture of Northern Syria* in <Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World> n.27, 2010, pp. 103-120; W. GRAVES, *Preserving Old Aleppo*, in <Aramco World Magazine> May/June 1999, edited by Robert Arndt., p. 12.

Link: <http://archnet.org/system/publications/contents/6721/original/DPC3576.pdf?1384801256>

28 As general bibliography: J J.L. BACHARACH, *Marwanid Umayyad Building Activities: Speculations on Patronage* in G. Necipoglu, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1996

S. BIANCA, *Medieval Citadels Between East and West*, edited by Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Milan, 2007; B. BREND, *Islamic Art*, Harvard University Press., 1991; R. GROUSSET, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*, Rutgers University Press., 1991.; M.T. HOUTSMA, *E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913-1936*, 1987 ; G. MITCHELL, *Architecture of the Islamic World*, Thames and Hudson, 1978; Y. TABAA, *Constructions of power and piety in medieval Aleppo*, 1997, Penn State Press.

29 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2314459/Umayyad-Mosque-Archaeologists-left-horrified-historic-11th-century-minaret-reduced-rubble.html#ixzz34GP2SvGD>

30 M.T. HOUTSMA, *E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913-1936*, 1987, p. 378.

31 S. GIZZI, *Il vuoto e il suo contrario nella progettazione architettonica e nel restauro*, in ΤΟΠΟΣ e Progetto: il vuoto, Gangemi Editore, Roma, 200, pp. 69-88.

32 E. MOREZZI, *Roberto Pane e l'istanza psicologica: sviluppi di un concetto nel caso-studio di Hiroshima*, in: Roberto Pane tra storia e restauro: architettura, città, paesaggio, Napoli, 27-28 ottobre 2008, pp. 277-282.

33 S. CASIELLO (edited by) *I ruderi e la guerra. Memoria, ricostruzioni, restauri*, Nardini, Firenze, 2011, pp. 1-10

34 R. PANE, *Città antiche, edilizia nuova*, ESI, Napoli, 1959, p. 100.

35 The word is invented by Bogdan Bogdanovic, mayor of Belgrade, M. SAFIER, *Confronting Urbicide: commentaries on September 11th*, in <CITY> n. 5, November 2001, p. 146.

36 M. AGNOLETTO, *Groundzero.exe. Costruire il vuoto. Edizione italiana ed inglese*, Kappa, Milano, 2004, pp. 12-45.

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