

# YOUNG SYRIAN ARCHITECTS (YSA) AT THE TIME OF CRISES

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The urban nature of the Syrian conflict has caused heavy physical damage to cities and displaced over half of the population. From those displaced, there are 6.5 million people internally displaced within Syria, occasionally for several times. The Syrian refugee crisis has attracted significant attention by media, researchers and policymakers, yet responses to crises inside Syria were not equally considered. This research paper addresses this gap and contributes to the knowledge of cities at war. It aims to understand the roles of architects at the time of war and focuses particularly on the possible ways to support them in their struggle to save their cities and protect their heritage. To do so, interviews were undertaken remotely from London, UK, with architects living in Homs, Syria; a city that has been radically reshaped by the mass destruction of its neighbourhoods. In addition, a workshop was organised with 25 architects in Homs to think of creative ideas for Syrian architects and international professionals in the built environment to help remotely from abroad. Findings show that there are several practical and highly needed projects that could be undertaken from distance to support architects in conflict zones e.g. providing online training courses, creating digital libraries in Arabic on conflict in cities, and establishing collaborative research projects between academics, architects and engineers outside and inside Syria. It is hoped that this research paper will influence academics, professionals and policy-makers to create tangible projects to support impacted communities in their struggle to sustain and reconstruct their cities and countryside. This is not only needed in Syria but could also be transformative to other countries as Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

Keywords: Architect, warzones, Homs, Syria, rebuilding, contested cities

## INTRODUCTION

### **Cities at War; War at Cities**

We live in an era of intensive destruction of cities and countryside. Wars entered cities and their urban settings with waves of heavy destruction of the built environment (Vale and Campanella, 2005). Cities have become the urban battlefield in many conflicts (Graham, 2012); as in Aleppo, Raqqa (Syria), Misrata (Libya), Gaza (Palestine), Mosul (Iraq) and Beirut (Lebanon). They were partially or completely besieged, contested, destroyed and divided; left in ruins for years of long-term ongoing conflicts. Ordinary civilians find themselves living in the midst of these conflicted cities, struggling in their everyday lives with new spatial and urban structures of fences, walls, checkpoints, besieged neighbourhoods, and non-functional

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areas (Piquard and Swenarton, 2011). Their everyday life is reshaped by the constantly shifting frontlines and changing dynamics of wars.

In war on cities, monumental architecture and cultural heritage sites are wilfully targeted for their meaning and significance (Grodach, 2002), and for their representation of the collective identity of civilisations (Viejo-Rose, 2014). Their destruction has been used as a cultural warfare for the collective memory these sites hold to their nations (Sørensen and Viejo-Rose, 2015). In recent decades, the damage caused to the ancient city of Nimrud in Iraq, Palmyra, the Ancient City of Aleppo, and Krak des Chevaliers in Syria, the destruction of Mostar's historic bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the several houses and historic buildings in the Old City of Sana'a, the airstrikes on the ancient city of Maarib in Yemen, and the blowing up of Bamiyan Buddha's in Afghanistan, have all caused national and international outrage as these sites mirror the weight of history and the achievements of civilisations and ancestors who lived in these regions.

In urbicide, the deliberate destruction of the built environment (Abujidi, 2014; Coward, 2008; Graham, 2008), destruction does not only target and impact selective cultural heritage sites, but entire residential areas; causing internal and external displacement of local communities. Thus, the destruction in many wars is no longer focused on specific buildings between fighting groups, but entire neighbourhoods are heavily destroyed, and sometimes, razed to the ground. This deliberate destruction of home is referred to as domicide (Porteous and Smith, 2003), that causes deep suffering to its impacted people not only because of the physical loss of their homes, but also because of the values that home represents i.e. safety, sense of security and belonging (Boano, 2011).

In Syria, since 2011, the mass destruction and sheer levelling of cities and countryside, has made it essential for architects to shift their thinking in response to destruction and displacement. They face extreme emergency challenges; with limited resources, difficult everyday living conditions, shortage of building materials, and lack of economic opportunities (Azzouz, 2018). But despite these challenges, and with the start of the ninth year of crises, architects are showing incredible levels of resilience to rehabilitate their cities, map damage, and protect the monumental and everyday heritage of local communities (Azzouz, 2019). However, these efforts could be supported and strengthened remotely by academics, architects and engineers who live and work outside Syria. This paper, therefore, aims to understand the several mechanisms and strategies for diasporic communities and international organisations and universities to support architects in warzones. This research is highly needed and timely to think of communities who live in ruined cities as they struggle to provide shelter to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), to rebuild their desolated neighbourhoods, and to protect and sustain what remains of their cities and countryside. The main research question of this is: how could architects and professionals in the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) sector outside Syria provide support and collaborate with local communities and architects inside Syria remotely?

### **Violence Taking Place in Syria**

For more than two millennia, architectural ruins and buried archaeological sites have been preserved in the Middle East reflecting the weight of history and the diverse civilisations that lived in the region. It is there in the Fertile Crescent that agriculture and urban societies were first established and flourished. Empires, military powers,

international traders and cultures have interfaced in the past resulting in the currently known 'Syria'.

However, the destruction of Syria since the beginning of the crises in 2011 until the present has radically reshaped the lives of millions of Syrians. Over half of the population has been displaced either internally or externally (10m), tens of thousands of lives have been lost and the country's glorious heritage and contemporary cities have been destructed (Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Destruction of residential areas in Homs, Syria. Source: Majd Murad, 2018.*

Whilst policy makers, researchers, professionals, aid organisations and politicians have directed significant interest towards the Syrian refugee and migrant crisis (Syrians displaced externally), less efforts have focused on the life of Syrians inside Syria - those who either had no choice to flee or decided to stay 'home' despite the violent conflict. Their presence reflects the resistance and resilience of these communities as their everyday life has been reshaped with extremely difficult life conditions. This research, therefore, explores this significant gap in knowledge by engaging with Syrians who are still inside Syria to bring the human agency to the struggle of Syrians at the time of war.

The research focuses on Homs, the third largest city in Syria, with around 800,000 inhabitants before 2011, and which half of it was heavily damaged in the last eight years (other 25% of the city is partially damaged). Homs is the city of the first author and is also where the second author currently resides and lectures. Many of the current research projects and emerging debates on Syria fail to engage with impacted Syrian community; which in turn lead to a lack of representation of Syrian voices raising questions about ethics and morals of emerging research projects. Some of these projects are even ran by researchers who do not speak the language or have no past experience on Syria - see more on this in (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019). The research addressed in this paper contrasts with past and current studies. It creates a

dialogue and a conversation with hard-to-reach participants who still reside in Syria and attempts to understand the real needs and wants of architects in warzones instead of imposing pre-determined solutions and projects as done by many international NGOs who impose their own agendas that - in several cases - do not mirror what local communities need.

### **Architects in Syria: Before 2011**

Before 2011, the architecture profession was associated with the Syrian Engineering Institute. All architects had to be members of the institute prior to being able to work independently. This is the same for all other engineering disciplines (civil, mechanical and structural for instance). Before the 20th century, city development was based on craftsmen, skilful builders and locals. Building legislations were formed mostly by religious directions and environmental aspects. With the beginning of the 20th century, and at the time of French mandate and its cultural and political impact; new architectural and urban styles were adopted by trained architects. After the end of the French Mandate in Syria, there has been an urban growth in cities, and there was a need to respond to that growth from architects and planners. All architects had to work for at least five years in one of the state's institutions before being able to open their private architectural practices. At the beginning, this was seen as an opportunity for architects to get practical experiences to understand the regulations and standards and to prepare architects themselves and to work independently in their own future practices.

However, with the increasing numbers of architecture graduates and the decreasing numbers of new public projects, these regulations changed accordingly; engineers had been exempted from this obligation in 1996, so that young architects can work independently. This has led to the emergence of new private architecture practices in the city that started to design and imagine several projects in Homs and these young architects were able to contribute to these projects. But even with this level of independence, rigid and inflexible building regulations made many of these young architects unable to express their ideas creatively; which impacted on the city and its identity. At the time, many young architects saw in the Western cities a source to import ideas and copy them in Homs (sometimes also influenced by hybrid architectural styles in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE). These influences led to the emergence of different architectural styles that do not mirror the life and culture of Homs.

Additionally, there was a gap between the architectural education at the university level and what architects had to do in practice. Many students worked on imaginary sites not on real sites and cases within the city, leading to ignorance of real challenges and surroundings. However, in the first decade of the twenty first century, the city was the site of new emerging ideas that proposed radical regeneration visions; these ideas were put together in a project called 'The Homs Dream'. This project relied on selecting strategic sites in the city that had importance in terms of location and significance. The main goal of this large-scale project was to increase investment activities by transforming these sites into investment and multi-functional projects. The proposal employed modern architectural styles, and suggested demolishing existing buildings at the heart of the city and replacing them with high-rise towers with over twenty-five floors in a city where the few high buildings were no more than ten floors. Despite the promises that were proposed, the project was heavily criticised by most of the Homsis as it was far from the real needs of people in the city. The

project was not an outcome of a city strategy that aims to improve the life conditions in the city, but rather it focused on specific sites at the City Centre. It was also seen as the construction of destruction as it aimed to destroy the familiar and change the social and cultural fabrics of the city. No consultation with local communities was undertaken and as a result, residents including owners and shopkeepers called for the project to stop. The 'Homs Dream' has never seen the light, and soon after its proposal, the crises started and reshaped the city.

### **Rebuilding and Thinking about Reconstruction Start at the Time of War**

The long-term war in Syria has made it essential for architects, engineers, urban planners and academics to shift their thinking in their struggle to protect their local heritage, to sustain their countryside and cities, and to think about the future reconstruction of the country. During the days of heavy shelling local architects and photographers were among the first people who started collecting photos of all threatened buildings, squares, corners all over the city. Many local residents joined this wave of documentation and as a result, new platforms on social media started presenting how the city is being transformed by the crises with the destruction of its built environment. Architects, just like all residents, participated in efforts to help displaced families who were hosted in schools or in other shared shelters after they left their troubled neighbourhoods. They no longer waited for 'post-war reconstruction' plans or 'peace resolutions' to rethink their role at the time of war, and to discuss the future rebuilding of their country. Rather, they worked on different levels to deal with rebuilding their ruined built environment, to provide shelter for the IDPs and to analyse and categorise levels of destruction damage in cities and countryside.

Local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and charities play a significant role in supporting devastated communities. Some charities might have existed before conflicts but evolve remarkably both in scale and missions throughout the years of war. Others emerge during the conflict to respond to the emergency needs of communities. In Homs, for instance, Jamiat Al-bir wa Al-Khadamat Al-Ejtemaeia (the Charity of Righteousness and Social Services) was found in 1956. However, since 2011, the charity's work has evolved and expanded enormously. New themes and projects have been created as emergency responses to the crises, and later, as long-term projects for the city's early recovery. Today, the charity has 750 staff and 1000 volunteers of local people. Throughout the conflict years, architects work for the charity has reached thousands of people focusing both on the tangible and intangible aspects of city recovery on different projects that include the rehabilitation of partially damaged apartments to enable IDPs return to their homes.

Beyond local NGOs and charities, international organisations provide different forms of assistance to support local communities preserving their built environment. However, this support is influenced by the level of engagement these organisations can offer, depending on whether they can function on the ground or not. In Syria, there are already several United Nations (UN) agencies working on the ground with local teams of architects and other specialities; whilst other international organisations decided not to enter the Syrian borders or fund any project inside Syria.

Syrian diasporas are also initiating new projects to think about the destruction and reconstruction of cities and towns in Syria. There are several attempts to map pre-war memories and to understand how this could influence the future of Syria; others are undertaking research projects on the reconstruction of Syria, not only from a tangible

perspective, but also from cultural and social perspectives. These efforts have also been supplemented by new emerging writings on urban issues related to rebuilding communities and reconstruction including themes such as land ownership, and conservation of architecture and cultural heritage. They are also keen to support their fellow architects who still reside in Syria, but there is an urgent need to know what the needs and mechanisms are to provide this support; which this research aims to explore.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research focuses on Homs City where 18 (50%) of the city's neighbourhoods were heavily damaged, and other 8 (22%) were partially damaged, whilst 10 (28%) neighbourhoods have minor to no damage but yet affected by the crises; according to a report in 2014 (UN-Habitat, 2014). Parts of the city were besieged during the war, and with the large-scale destruction of its built environment, the city is today divided by still standing areas and other ruined and empty abandoned areas. Throughout the years of war, the city was partially besieged multiple times with urban frontier of checkpoints, walls and fences. Now after eight years of conflict, debates on reconstruction of Syria have already emerged, but many of them have focused on the most famous and internationally well-known locations, such as the Ancient City of Aleppo, with lack of discussions on Homs, and other cities as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

### **Engaging with Local Architects Inside Syria**

There has been an increasing interest in building awareness about the Syrian crises internationally. This has been covered via different platforms; from museums and art galleries, to universities and think-tank institutions. Several talks, events, conferences and seminars have been organised since 2011 on different themes related to Syria. However, many of these efforts have failed to represent the Syrian voices and some have even failed to engage with impacted communities (even with Syrian diaspora, or remotely with Syrians inside Syria). There have been some panel discussions on Syria in top universities in the UK without a single Syrian on the panel. This research contrasts with these efforts as it humanises and individualises the Syrian crises by engaging with young architects who still reside in Homs.

This research builds on remote engagement with architects as both authors were outside Syria at the time of the research. The City of Homs, as other cities and towns in Syria, was the battlefield where the fights were carried out in its streets for several years. Architects, as other residents and professions in the city, have been kidnapped, displaced, threatened, and besieged. Many of them had to shift their thinking at the time of war, and to work in other disciplines. Today, there is a need for an international solidarity to support and collaborate with architects in contentious cities, even without being physically with them. This was the main motivation for undertaking this research and the reasons behind choosing this research method.

The research in this paper focuses on young architects for several reasons. First, these young architects are incredibly open to exploring new ideas, new ways of learning and research collaborations. They are advancing in the use of technology and keen to create a dialogue with audiences outside Syria for research and knowledge exchange. Secondly, young architects were at the forefront when local charities and NGOs emerged at the time of crises. They were heavily engaged and remarkably passionate to protect their city and communities. Together with young architects, a workshop and a conversation were organised remotely by the first author and the young

architects. These architects gathered together in Homs in an organisation called: Development, Organisations, Opportunity, Research and Services (DOORS) that is trying to create a network of architects to respond to the challenges facing their city and to think about the future of their country. The organisation has a network of 125 professionals in Homs from different backgrounds (e.g. IT, mechanical, electrical and civil engineers). However, one of DOORS' teams focuses solely on architecture which includes 25 architects; and the workshop was carried out with them. This group includes young architecture graduates and final year architecture students (architecture degree is five years in Syria).

### **Conversation with Local Architects in Syria**

Under difficult living and working conditions still faced in Homs, the young architects joined the event in December 2017. The discussions initially focused on the role of architects at the time of conflict and offered brief insights on the ways the built environment in ruined cities can either help to unite or further divide societies (Yassin, 2008). This included examples where the ruins of wars were preserved to remember the times of conflicts, as in Coventry Cathedral in the UK and the remains of the Berlin Wall in Germany; and the importance of memory when the past is being erased, and how could this memory influence and shape the future of contested cities. Attention was then directed towards exploring how to help architects in warzones remotely by diasporic communities and international academics and organisations who are interested in providing distance support.

In an exercise organised by the first author, young architects were asked to create a list of undertakings they think Syrian diaspora and international researchers, professionals and academics can help with from distance. These topics also reflect on the special interests of the architectural team and the work they would like to practically address in their organisation. They divided themselves into three small groups, and later each group presented their ideas. Findings of two of the three groups are presented in the following.

#### **Group A:**

- Academic and educational support: There is a need to create online programmes that focus on different aspects of the built environment. These programmes could be supplemented with lectures where academics and researchers can review the young architect's work and provide the appropriate help.
- Connect with international researchers: If architects inside and outside Syria are connected, then this connection would be helpful to be up-to-date about the emerging debates in the built environment, and hopefully, it will lead young architects in Syria to be part of emerging research projects.
- Create online courses on project management and construction.
- The need to transfer knowledge for young architects from English to Arabic: Resources and educational materials can be more effective and impactful if they are in Arabic, so more people can benefit from. Syrian diaspora (and other Arabic speaking architects and researchers) could potentially help with this and support channels of knowledge exchange.
- Create opportunities for training outside Syria: There are many conferences and training programmes on Syria taking place in different countries. It would be helpful to be able to attend and participate in these events.

- Need to create better mechanisms and channels to exchange knowledge and educational materials from and to Syrians inside Syria.

Group B:

- Online workshops: The need to create and share knowledge on architecture, construction and engineering through online workshops and learning courses.
- Research collaborations with universities outside Syria: This would be important to develop research skills and conduct new and original research on a Syrian city at war, which is needed in the emerging debates on reconstruction of Syrian cities.
- Establish platforms to support the construction and structural projects in Homs, through online project review that enable live feedback and help.
- Provide support to access research articles as young architects and students do not have access to materials through university accounts.
- The need for more examples on reconstruction of cities that went through conflicts with more details about the different matters surrounding the reconstruction of these cities.
- The need for case study projects in real situations and the different stages of the project life-cycle (from brief and concept design, to construction, hand over and in use). Particularly, it would be helpful to have projects cases where they have been built in emergency situations and after wars and disasters.
- Develop a shared online library, where recourses could put all together; including: Learning materials, online courses, educational tools and project case studies.

### **From Research to Practice**

As seen in these two groups, there are areas of overlap, and young architects highlight the need for educational channels to transfer experiences, skills, information and knowledge from and to Syria. Each of the ideas suggested at the workshop could be transformed into a project to support and help architects in warzones, but there is a need for collaboration between local and international academics and AEC professionals to create programmes that support architects in warzones in their struggle to save and sustain their cities and communities. All the three groups emphasised on the need for them to access new knowledge on cities and wars to learn from other scenarios and explore how cities rise again after destruction. They acknowledge the potentiality of digital platforms to collaborate, create dialogues and access research and knowledge.

There are many opportunities and potentialities to help architects inside Syria and in other contested regions. This help could be provided by academics and professionals in the AEC sector outside Syria, and at the same time, Syrian academics and architects can provide knowledge and experiences on what is happening on the ground in Syria, and how communities carried out in their everyday life at the time of destruction and desolation of cities. There is an urgent need for international solidarity and for academics and professionals outside Syria to think about their role and responsibilities in providing support and help to communities in ruined cities.

With the displacement and or killing of many architects outside Syria, and the lack of research and access to academic papers, the academic and educational levels have been heavily affected. At the university in Homs, the staff in Urban Planning division decreased from 20 before 2011 to only 3 now. Therefore, many students and

architects inside Syria emphasise on the need to catch up with new knowledge and materials that are impacting the built environment.

There is a need for academic and professional materials in Arabic on different cities that went through conflict. Translations of previous research papers and policy reports could contribute to the knowledge of destruction and reconstruction of cities in Arabic. Translated Arabic resources and the creation of digital library could focus on different aspects related to war on cities including sharing space in divided cities, the politics of reconstruction, heritage and the everyday life in contested cities, the possible ways architects and planners can engage with local communities to shape the future of their built environment, and the role of architecture in providing a sense of social cohesion and unity in war-torn cities. Such translations are helpful to architects, engineers, urban planners, NGOs and local communities, not only in Syria, but also in other Middle Eastern countries such as Palestine, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

## **CONCLUSION**

At the time of destruction and erasure of the past; architects rediscover and re-examine their role in response to the destruction of the built environment and displacement of local communities. They explore how their profession contribute directly to alleviate social, economic and environmental crises impact that has been compounded tremendously by the disasters of war. Syrian architects have also discovered how participatory architecture can enrich their thoughts instead of working solely without engaging with residents (as in the case of the 'Homs Dream'). They are fully aware of academic shortages in their educational institutions caused by war time and seek new platforms of learning. They are also working on building bridges with diasporic communities and international organisations and architects at the time of crises to exchange knowledge and establish learning and collaboration projects.

This paper has shown several creative ideas suggested by a group of Syrian young architects who still reside in Homs. It shows a wide range of opportunities for international architects, engineers, organisations, academics and researchers to support and collaborate with architects in war-zones. These ideas should be examined and translated into tangible projects that strengthen the work of local architects who live in contested environments, enable them to protect what remains of their cities and to put the old and new pieces of their built environment together again. It is hoped that the research in this paper will influence academics and professionals to rethink who are the communities that need help, and to consider the challenges facing communities in destructed cities such as Homs.

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