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# World Heritage Patrimoine mondial

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CONVENTION CONCERNING THE PROTECTION OF THE WORLD  
CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

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**Item 7 of the Provisional Agenda: State of conservation of properties inscribed on the World Heritage List and/or on the List of World Heritage in Danger.**

**Point 7 de l'Ordre du jour provisoire: Etat de conservation de biens inscrits sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial et/ou sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial en péril**

MISSION REPORT / RAPPORT DE MISSION

Ancient City of Damascus (Syrian Arab Republic) (C 20) /  
Ancienne ville de Damas (République arabe syrienne) (C 20)

23 - 29 April 2008 / 23 - 29 avril 2008

This mission report should be read in conjunction with Document:  
Ce rapport de mission doit être lu conjointement avec le document suivant:

WHC-08/32.COM/7A

WHC-08/32.COM/7A.Add

WHC-08/32.COM/7B

WHC-08/32.COM/7B.Add





**International Council on  
Monuments and Sites**

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**Conseil International  
des Monuments et des Sites**

## MISSION REPORT

<b>WH Site:</b>	<b>Ancient City of Damascus</b>
<b>Type of travel:</b>	Joint UNESCO/ICOMOS monitoring mission
<b>Participants:</b>	Daniele Pini, WHC consultant Didier Repellin, ICOMOS expert Franca Miglioli, UNESCO - WHC
<b>Dates of mission:</b>	23 – 29 April 2008

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- H.E. Dr Ghassan Nseir, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of the Syrian Arab Republic to UNESCO;
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- the Governorate of Damascus for its hospitality;
- Eng. Amjad Alres - Manager of Old Damascus, from the Governorate of Damascus, for his time, organization and pleasant company;
- the team of the MAM Programme and the GTZ for their co-operation.

## **Executive summary**

The mission met the different stakeholders involved in the conservation and management of the Ancient City:

- the Directorates of the Governorate in charge of the Old City;
- the staff of the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) in charge of safeguarding of the cultural heritage of Damascus;
- other experts working with different roles in the conservation issues of the Old City.

On the basis of the presentations offered by the different administrations and counterparts, the visits to the sites carried out officially and informally, and the documents collected during the mission, the experts consider that, whereas a remarkable effort in the conservation of the major architectural heritage has been made in recent years by the Directorate of Old Damascus and the DGAM, large parts of the remaining historic fabric suffer from a severe physical and functional decay.

The issues of urban rehabilitation in the WH site of the Ancient City of Damascus are nowadays addressed by several projects and studies carried out by different administrations and institutions, and the need to ensure a consequent effort in conservation seems to be largely shared by all the concerned bodies.

Nevertheless many of the recent and ongoing interventions still demonstrate that more sensitive planning, architectural and archaeological approaches need to be adopted, which would consider the whole historic urban fabric, and not only the individual registered monuments, as an heritage to be preserved. To this regard, an effort has to be made to raise awareness amongst officials and public opinion about heritage values of the Old City, and to increase management capacities and technical skills on conservation methods and techniques.

# **1 BACKGROUND TO THE MISSION**

## **1.1 Inscription history and issues raised in the ICOMOS evaluation report at the time of inscription**

The Nomination File, very succinctly, states that: “Founded in the 3rd millennium B.C., Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East. In the Middle Ages, it was the centre of a flourishing craft industry, specializing in swords and lace. The city has some 125 monuments from different periods of its history – one of the most spectacular is the 8th-century Great Mosque of the Umayyads, built on the site of an Assyrian sanctuary.

Damascus is the site of rare artistic and aesthetic accomplishments and masterpieces of man's creative spirit. Its old quarters recount the different periods of its history. The old city, in its overall organization, expresses the specific character of the Moslem city, with its Arab way of life and culture. Far from being only a portrayal of the past, it is a living entity, established in such a way that its every element falls into a place created especially for it, justifying its presence. The old city represents a richly endowed heritage as regards its cultural property and possibilities for tourism and economic activity. For almost two millennia, this district was the heart of a royal city and a religious centre, a rare combination in the history of cities.”

Even if the Advisory body agreed on the importance, the quality, the value of Damascus and its old town, it was underlined that the dossier would have required a concise analysis of the archaeological elements, the types of human settlements and statistics on the kinds of human settlement with their individual characteristics.

The Committee inscribed the Ancient City of Damascus on the World Heritage list in 1979, at its 3rd session under criteria (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi), noting the reservation expressed by ICOMOS concerning the threat to the site from rapid urban development.

There was no indication of the existence of a definite buffer zone in the official documents accompanying the nomination dossier.

Moreover, it has to be stressed that Damascus' historic fabric is not limited to the inscribed WH site - the Ancient City inside the walls -, which definitely represents the cultural and functional core and holds the highest concentration of monuments, but it clearly includes many neighbourhoods outside the city walls where a very strong continuity may be observed with the historic fabric laying inside the walls from the points of view of the heritage values, the spatial organisation, the economic activities and the social dynamics.

## **1.2 Examination of the State of Conservation by the World Heritage Committee and its Bureau**

Until 2007, the state of conservation of the site of the Ancient City of Damascus was the object of only one mission report in 1986, whereas in the 1990s, on the basis of specific mission reports, the World Heritage Committee took several decisions in relation to the conservation problems of single monuments (in particular on the restoration of the Mosque of the Omayyads and the Citadel) asking in particular that "any further work be undertaken prior to a careful and in-depth study of the present needs, and in conformity with the standards of the international community concerning restoration work which respects the historical value of the monuments".

In January 2007, the Governor of Damascus informed the World Heritage Centre of a large scale project that would have involved the King Faisal Street area, tangent to the northern perimeter of

the city walls, including the demolition of the existing historical urban fabric. The World Heritage Committee, informed on this project at its last session, requested the State Party to submit a report and to invite a joint UNESCO/ICOMOS mission to assess the state of conservation of the property.

### **1.3 Justification of the mission**

The mission was carried out by Mr. Daniele Pini (WHC consultant), Mr Didier Repellin (ICOMOS expert) with Franca Miglioli from UNESCO – WHC, upon request of the Syrian authorities and in compliance with the World Heritage Committee Decision (Decision: 31 COM 7B.58), in order to:

- 1. Assess the State of Conservation of the Ancient City of Damascus World Heritage site;*
- 2. Moreover, assess if:*
  - a) planned and implemented projects respect the integrity of the property;*
  - b) Infrastructure works are planned and implemented under high quality archaeological supervision;*
  - c) the legal framework for the protection of the property has been improved and detailed;*
  - d) the use of traditional restoration techniques within the property has become compulsory to guarantee the preservation of the property's integrity;*
- 3. Give technical advice to the State Party to consider extending the boundaries of the property in order to include its valuable historical neighborhoods and to define the boundaries of the proposed buffer zone.*
- 4. Submit to the World Heritage Centre for approval a detailed report on the evaluation on the urban development project including recommendations for future actions.*

## 2. NATIONAL POLICY FOR THE PRESERVATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE WORLD HERITAGE PROPERTY

### 2.1. Legal and institutional framework

The responsibility of protecting the cultural heritage in Syria is under the Ministry of Culture, the high Council of Antiquities and the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) by the Law of Antiquities (Decree 222/1963) and its modifications. Following this law, the “Antiquity Authorities” (DGAM) should also provide a protection area around the registered sites and approve each project related to protected sites, including the rules for building activity.

Actually, the building activity inside the property inscribed on the World Heritage List is regulated by Decision 826/1996, “Restoring and rebuilding system of the Old City within the walls”, issued in 1996 by the Executive Office of Damascus Governorate Council, under the Ministry of Local Administration.

A High Committee for Safeguarding the Old Town within the walls has been created with representative of different bodies to try to coordinate the building activities. In addition to being responsible of the strategic planning for the Old City, it is also in charge of approving the requests for commercial licenses and the permits for restoring and rebuilding. A Technical Committee, a Technical Office and a Monitoring Committee, with specific executive tasks, complete the established institutional framework.

The mentioned Dec. 826 allows three types of interventions with increasing complexity, for which different procedures to obtain the permit are defined:

- Permit for simple restoring,
- Permit for restoring,
- Rebuilding permit.

The type of allowed intervention seems to be defined in relation to the current state of conservation of the building instead of its architectural quality. So, the logic is based on different levels of intervention instead of different degrees of protection of the historic fabric. The control is established case by case following the procedure which involves an increasing number of steps and bodies according to the type of intervention required. The basic criterion is the reference to the 1926-27 cadastral map, that is used as a baseline to determine the type and extent of the possible intervention.

This kind of approach, not defining *a priori* the degree of protection for each building, makes difficult an objective judgement of the requests for permits and, moreover, can incite owners in neglecting the buildings, waiting to obtain a rebuilding permit rather than restoring the ancient architectures.

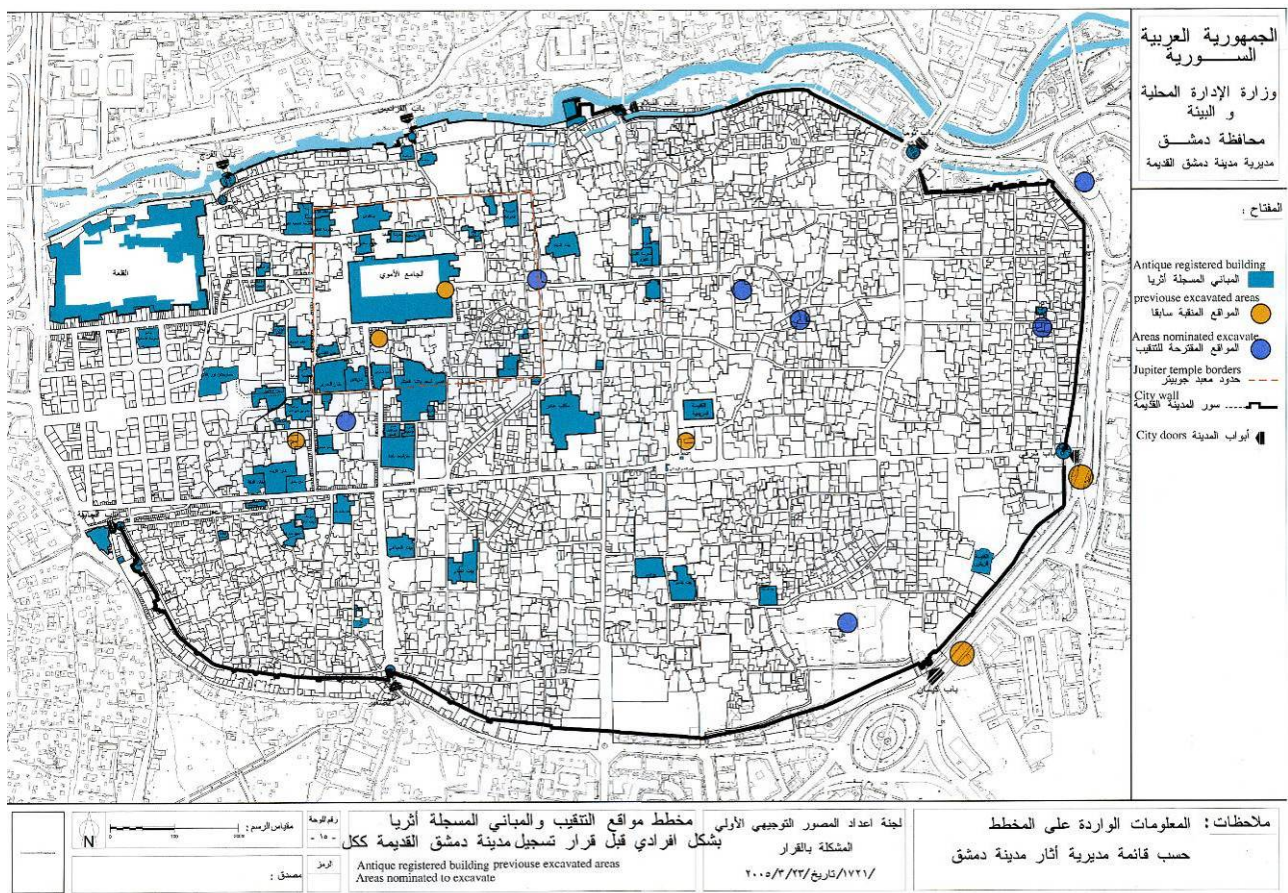
The legislation in force for the Old City is also applied in some historic quarters outside the city walls, listed according to the Law of Antiquities between 1988 and 2006, whereas some additional historic areas are designated for listing, but are not yet listed.



## 2.2. Protection measures for the listed sites and buffer zone

The World Heritage site covers a surface of 135 ha, enclosed by the thread of the Roman Walls, and it counted 110 buildings listed in the inscription application<sup>1</sup>. If Islam's influence on different historic periods is prevailing, the architectural and archaeological heritage bears great evidence of earlier cultures, particularly the Roman and the Byzantine, which clearly reflect on the buildings and the morphology of the urban pattern.

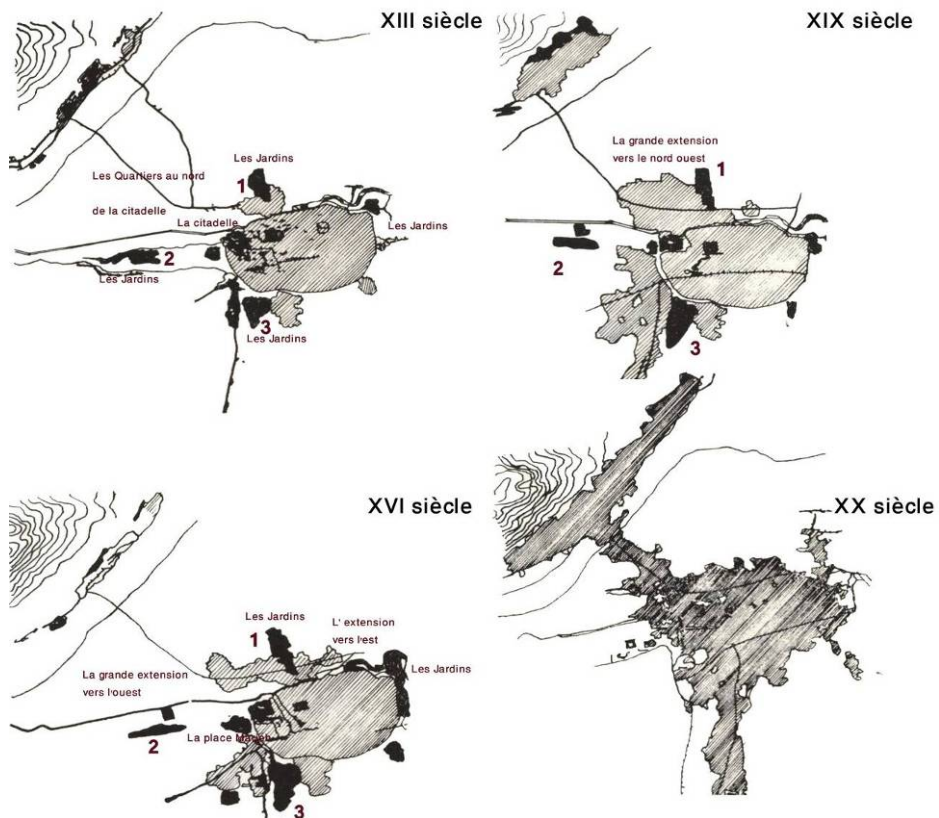
Most of the listed buildings and archaeological sites are mainly concentrated in the western side of the walled city, but it has to be stressed that most of the urban fabric layout has remained unchanged through the last two centuries, its architectural heritage being largely preserved from major amputations.



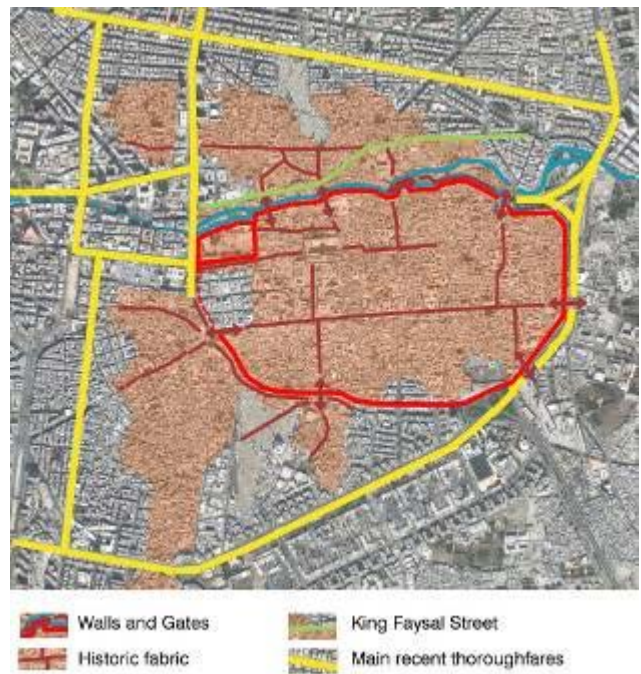
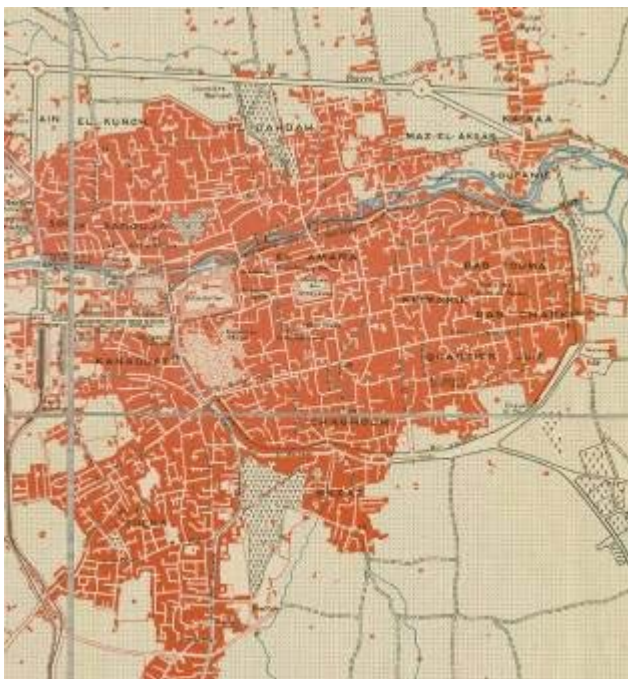
Listed buildings and archaeological sites in the WH site (source: Governorate of Damascus - Directorate of Old Damascus)

It has also to be stressed that the WH site is only a part of the larger historic urban area, which developed well beyond the City Walls since the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the North, the West and the South, along the main roads leading to the gates. The suburbs of Qanawat, Souk al Srijja, Midan, Sarouja and al -Uqaiba represent an essential component of the Old City and in spite of the recent urbanisation and the heavy urban renewal that occurred in the city centre in the last decades, still present important heritage value both in their urban fabric and architecture.

<sup>1</sup> This number has probably increased even if no detailed information is available about the losses and the new registrations, which occurred since 1979.



*The Development of the Old City (source DGAM)*



*Left: Damascus map of 1929 (detail). Right: the remaining historic fabric in 2005. The walls thread (in red) encompasses the World Heritage site.*

These suburbs are closely tied to the Ancient City by very strong cultural, spatial and functional linkages, even if the new road network and the recent urban renewal interventions represent in

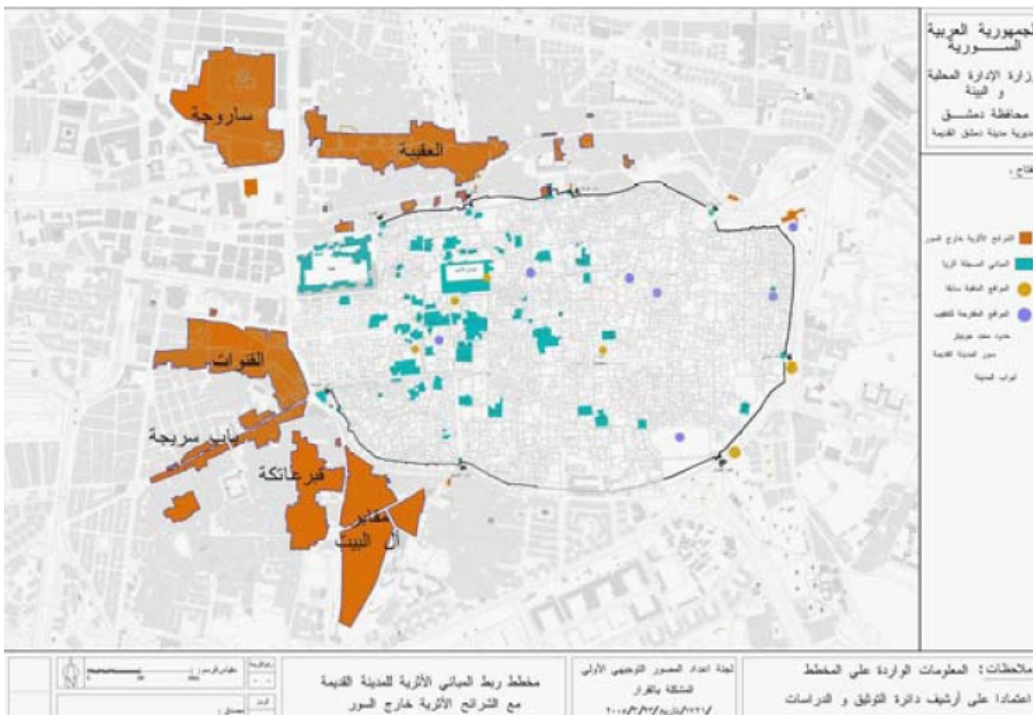
many places a definite rupture in the physical continuity and consistency of the whole historic urban fabric.

Since 1988, some parts of the suburbs of Qanawat, Souk al Srijja, Midan, Sarouja have been registered as protected areas and nowadays al –Uqaiba is designated for listing. However, large parts of the remaining historic fabric remains unprotected, and may be threatened by interventions which may imply further heritage losses.

The clear evidence of these linkages led the experts to consider Old Damascus – i.e. the walled city and its suburbs - as a whole, from which the Ancient City cannot be separated. In particular they assume that the continuity between the WH site delimited by the walls and the neighbourhoods outside the ancient walls has to be considered as a heritage value in itself, to be preserved and enhanced.

To this purpose it is worth reminding the risks which are inherent to the proposed urban redevelopment project tangent to the northern perimeter of the city walls (see below): the issues raised in the discussion make a strong argument for the urgent need to establish appropriate protection measures for the historic suburbs.

However, at this stage, the mission considers premature the possible extension of the boundaries of the WH site to include these historical suburbs, since a detailed assessment of their cultural values is not yet available.



The sites registered in the Ancient City and the historic suburbs, listed or designated to be listed (source: Governorate of Damascus - Directorate of Old Damascus)

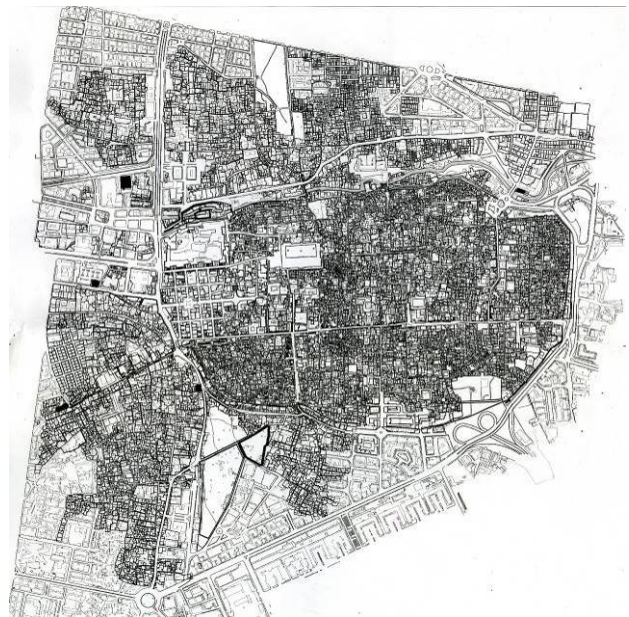
As mentioned, the Law of Antiquities foresees the creation of a protection area for the listed sites, but until now no official perimeter has been identified for the Old City. The *Protection Committee of the Old Damascus* in May 2007 became a *Committee for the Protection and Development of Old Damascus and its Buffer Zone*.

Following the official request made by the World Heritage Committee at its last session, the buffer zone for the WH site is now being identified. A first draft, proposed by a MAM consultant (see

below), was annexed to the SOC report submitted by the State Party in January 2008. The outline of the buffer zone in this document is based on a rich survey and documentation of the existing conditions and, in general, matches with an indicative perimeter of the possible “buffer zone” of the WH site suggested by a World Heritage Centre consultant in a recent mission (December 2007). The Committee for Old Damascus is studying a slightly different perimeter, larger than the first version, to be discussed and approved by the relevant Government Departments before its formal submission to the World Heritage Committee. All of these proposals agree on considering to include in the buffer zone:

- The whole remaining fabric of Old Damascus “extra muros”, to be identified on the basis of historic cartographic documents. The cadastral maps of 1920 would provide an excellent reference and lead to consider the inclusion of all the areas developed until the Late Ottoman period, including the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century “Turkish city”;
- The outer areas of recent urbanisation, where renewal and re-development interventions have to be controlled, in order to prevent further traffic pressures and uncontrolled land use transformations on the historic fabric.

In any case, it is clear that the definition of a buffer zone for the Old City is in the agenda of the State Party, being identified as an urgent priority for the preservation of the site also in the last Meeting of the sub-committee of CIVVIH- ICOMOS for the Mediterranean (April 2008).



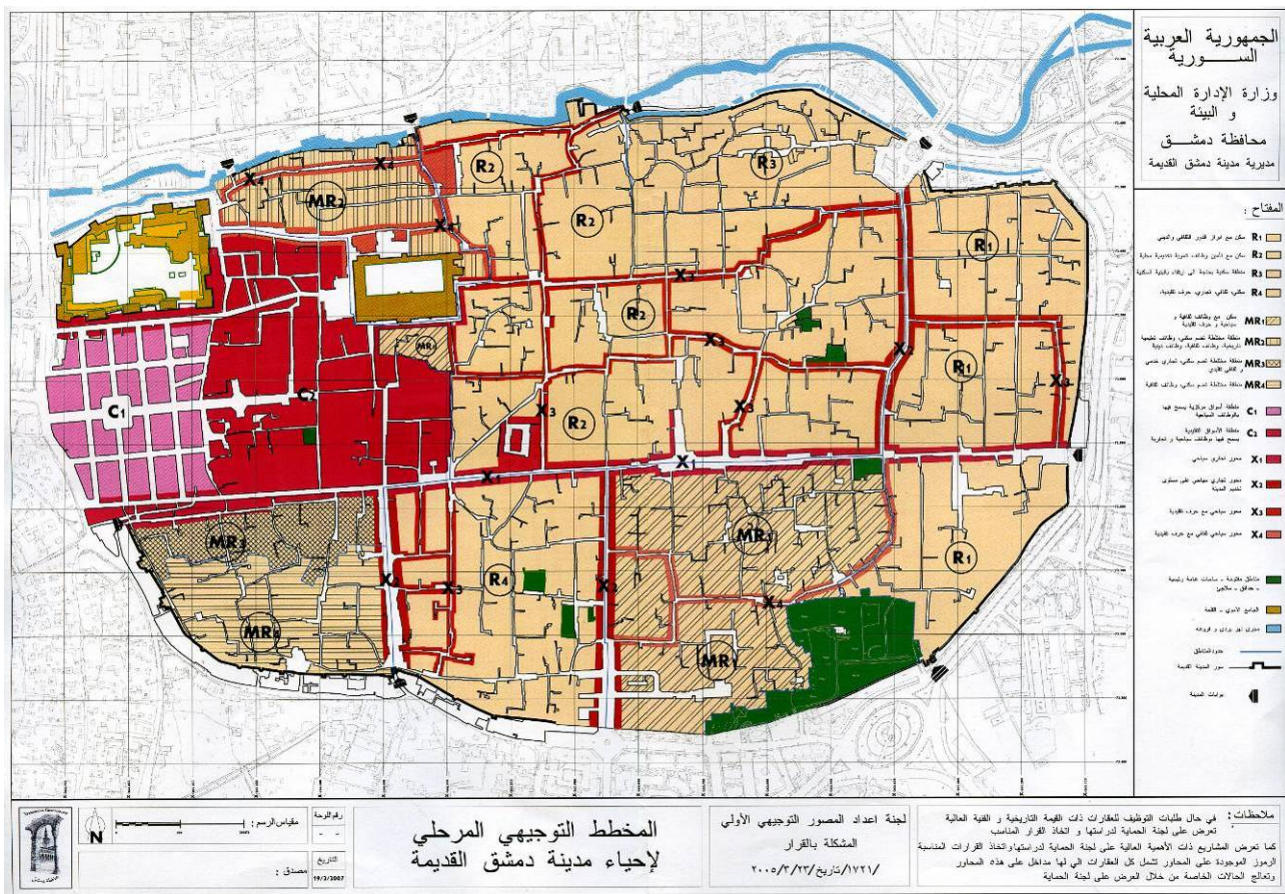
*Left: Potential buffer zone as outlined by MAM (January 2008); Right: detail of proposal of Buffer Zone being elaborated by the Directorate of Old Damascus (May 2008)*

## 2.3 Management tools and effectiveness

### 2.3.1 The Plan for the Old Damascus<sup>2</sup>

A Plan for the Old City of Damascus has been studied in 2003 and subsequently revised so far, which only covers the perimeter of the Ancient City “intra-muros”. It aims at providing a planning regulation framework, taking in consideration the “interactions between the archaeological, urban, social and economical factors ... in addition to the ties with Damascus areas outside the Wall” and is considered as a framework for the preparation of more detailed plans<sup>3</sup>.

The Plan is based on the identification of “areas” and “axis”, representing the border of each “area”, with different characteristics.



*The Plan of the Old Damascus (source: Governorate of Damascus – Directorate of Old Damascus, MAM).*

*The letter “R” designates the different types of “residential areas”, “MR” the mixed areas (residential + other activities), “C” commercial, “X” the axis.*

The “areas” in which the urban fabric of the Ancient City is subdivided, reflect very schematically the existing prevailing functions – i.e. residential, mixed, commercial - and to a certain extent,

<sup>2</sup> This Plan was called in different ways by the different persons met, and in the documents analysed by the experts. They usually refer to a “conservation plan”, and in some cases to a “conservation and development plan”, to stress the role it should play in revitalising the Old City.

<sup>3</sup> See the report on the “Phases Land Application Scheme to Revive Damascus Old City”, Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, Damascus Governorate – Directorate of Damascus Old City, 15.11.2005. This Plan is called

particularly for the residential areas, the social and cultural characteristics of the different quarters. As for the different “residential areas”, the general objective is to maintain housing and reduce densities, whilst addressing the social unbalances and securing services and facilities; in the “mixed areas”, different types of activities and functions – cultural, religious, tourism, crafts – can be combined with housing; whilst in the “commercial area”, the trade activities or the industries are prevented, that may create a burden or a damage for the historic fabric.

The same kind of criteria are outlined for the “axis”, which may be defined as “commercial” or “tourist” and “cultural”, but often include in the same category streets with different and heterogeneous activities, architectural values and spatial patterns.

It may be observed that the “areas” and “axis” have been outlined in a rather raw way, with very little concern for the mix of functions and architectural types that characterises indeed the urban fabric, and without paying any attention to the different quality of places and buildings.

Thus the Plan consists of a sort of simplified “zoning”, which defines some general planning principle and objective, but doesn’t really cope with the variety and the complexity of the urban fabric and its architectural heritage. Not only does it lack of a clear and accurate definition of the different “areas” and “axis”, but it also does not provide an appropriate set of rules, which may determine the required level of protection and define the specific types of interventions to be admitted according to the heritage values of the urban fabric and the individual buildings.

So far it only offers guidelines to be used by the Committee and the Directorate of Old Damascus in permitting private interventions. To this regard, it must be noted that the Plan is already applied, even if it is only partially endorsed<sup>4</sup>, and that further studies have been undertaken in order to establish detailed plans and a more accurate and effective regulation.

It is hoped that the new planning tools under preparation may provide a clear definition of the different levels of protection to be applied to the different parts of the urban fabric and to the specific elements of heritage value, with an accurate identification of the types of interventions required or permitted, based on the conspicuous information made available from the surveys carried out in the recent years.

### **2.3.2 Planning management**

The management of the Old City and the WH site in particular is mainly entrusted to two administrative bodies:

- The Ministry of Culture – General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), responsible for the designation of listed monuments and protected areas, and interventions of restoration;
- The Governorate of Damascus – Directorate for the Old City, responsible for restoration projects, infrastructural networks, public spaces, archaeological sites, land building permits.

Other administrative bodies, and NGO are involved as far as specific sectors of activities are concerned, and the experts consider that the need is urgent to ensure a better coordination amongst the various public institutions, both in performing the planning process and implementing the most relevant projects.

Some international agencies cooperate in the preservation of the Old City; in particular:

- the Municipal Administration Modernization (MAM) Programme, funded by the E.U. and carried out under the responsibility of the Ministry for Local Administration and Environment.

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<sup>4</sup> Apparently, no agreement exists amongst the different concerned bodies on the definition of certain “areas”

Among MAM's activities to improve the effectiveness of local governance, there is the support for the preparation of the Integrated Development and Conservation Plan for the Old City of Damascus, a draft environmental plan and some tourists' activities:

- the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ) is co-financing projects on housing rehabilitation through financial and technical support and a program of rehabilitation of the Khan, including pilot interventions, in collaboration with the Governorate;
- the Italian Technical Cooperation, through a rehabilitation project for the Citadel;
- the Japan International Cooperation Agency, developing in particular a detailed district plan in one of the historic neighborhoods outside the walls as pilot area in the framework of a general study for sustainable development urban planning for Damascus.

### **3. ASSESSMENT OF THE STATE OF CONSERVATION OF THE PROPERTY**

#### **3.1. Relevant issues and threats concerning the historic fabric of Old Damascus**

##### **3.1.1 The overall condition of the urban fabric**

Since the inscription of the Ancient City on the World Heritage list in 1979, the morphological layout and the spatial pattern of the historic fabric have remained basically unchanged. The “modernisation” undertaken according to the Master Plan of Ecochard (1968), with the road widening and the building reconstruction along the main axis, was stopped and a widespread effort of urban conservation has been developed for the WH site since 1980s. This is nowadays largely preserved in its historic integrity even if occasionally some harmful and intrusive interventions occur, and most of all, the surrounding historic suburbs, particularly Sarouja, have been recently heavily affected by heavy infrastructural works and destructive urban renewal interventions.

However, as it was already pointed out in 1986<sup>5</sup>, in spite of the many and important conservation works carried out to preserve the major traditional souks and monumental sites in the central core of the Ancient City, large parts of the remaining historic fabric, within and outside the city walls, suffer from a severe physical and functional decay. This largely reflects the transformations occurred since 1930s, which developed the modern City Centre adjacent to the Old City and modified its functions and role with relevant changes in the socio-economic structure and land-use.

The conditions of the historic fabric are heavily affected by the increase of the ratio of poor resident population, the diffusion of incompatible activities, the deterioration of urban infrastructure and an overall lack of maintenance. In particular, in the Ancient City intra-muros, the following may be observed based on the data of the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment and the Damascus Governorate – Directorate of Damascus Old City:

- the residential area and the resident population have progressively decreased since 1936<sup>6</sup>, but in recent years the population density is rapidly growing and has reached 723 inhabitants per ha in 2005. There is a large proportion of “newcomers” (18%), illiterate and unemployed residents, and most of the households are tenants (67%);
- the housing stock conditions are rather poor: only 35% of the houses are in “good” condition, whilst 34% is “medium”. Therefore about 1/3 suffer from serious structural pathologies, are abandoned or collapsed and may represent a “risk”: in the period 2002 – 2006, the lack of maintenance and appropriate levels of safety has caused an average of 70 accidents per year (i.e. a total of 321 fires and 33 collapses).

On the other hand, there has been a considerable increase of the surfaces occupied by commercial activities, which now reach 11% of the surface and expand from the traditional souks in the residential quarters and the historic suburbs extra-muros. The persistence of the historic and traditional handicraft and commercial activities still make the whole Old Damascus a vital component of the City Centre. This vitality, in many cases, adds to the heritage values in making

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<sup>5</sup> See Stefano Bianca: “Conservation of the Old City of Damascus”, Technical report RP/1986-1987/XI.1.3, UNESCO, Paris 1987.

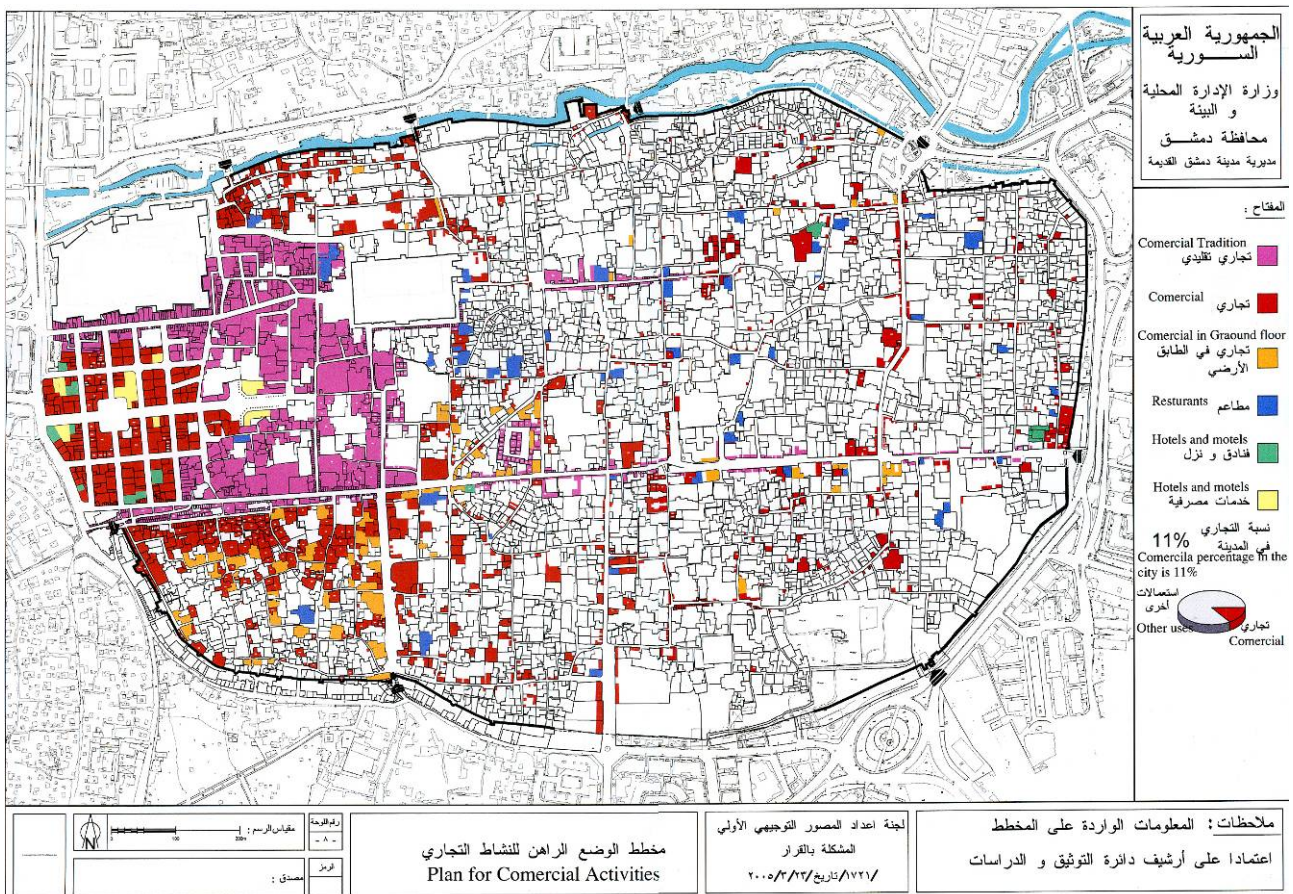
<sup>6</sup> The residential area was 94,2 ha (60.000 inhabitants) in 1936, 90 ha in 1965, when the resident population reached its peak (65.000 inhabitants), and 76 ha in 1995 (45.000 inhabitants). Now it is only 62,2 ha, with the same population (45.000 inhabitants)



the historic fabric attractive for tourists and visitors, but also and most of all, makes it still capable of offering fundamental expenditure and income opportunities, as well as services of any kind to the resident population of the larger metropolitan area.

The historic functional structure, which consolidated in the last century, remains basically unchanged, with a clear spatial distribution of the different types of activities, reflecting the strong functional and economical linkages between commerce and handicraft, and the different levels of attraction – i.e. the urban and local clientele, and the tourists. The traditional “souk economy” and all its related activities (manufacturing, stocking) has developed to cope with the growing demand of a lower and middle income population of the larger metropolitan area, which is rapidly increasing and has reached many times the size of the resident population of the Ancient City.

The main commercial spines attracting the urban and tourist clientele are still those of the traditional souk within the walls, particularly in the western side next to the modern City Centre; whilst the retail and the handicraft activities catering the neighbouring local population tend to concentrate near the historic gates, where the presence of larger food markets and specific craft and industrial activities (metal, timber, fabric, leather, and so on) is favoured by the possibility of vehicular access. Thus, commercial and semi-industrial activities are spreading into the residential area of the walled City and its suburbs, inside and outside the city walls, with a heavy impact on the environmental conditions and the integrity of the historic fabric.



Commercial activities in the Ancient City (source: Governorate of Damascus - Directorate of Old Damascus)



*Traffic congestion, commercial activities and historic fabric on the borders of the Old City*

In many places, activities congestion, vehicular uncontrolled circulation and informal parking add to the poor state of urban infrastructure and become incompatible with the spatial and functional pattern of the historic fabric. This situation results not only in an increasing environmental disease but also in the physical deterioration of public spaces, buildings and archaeological remains, and in the evident loss of perception and understanding of their heritage values.

The public spaces in particular are generally in a very poor state of maintenance, with lack of appropriate urban furniture and infrastructure, and without any control of vehicular traffic and parking. Some relevant archaeological remains, such as the Eastern Temple Gate or the Roman Arch on the Via Recta, stay neglected in a very ordinary and shabby urban context, almost made invisible and inaccessible by all kind of visual and physical intrusions.

### **3.1.2. The conditions of the architectural heritage**

In this context, the advanced state of disrepair of the city walls represents a major threat that has to be addressed as a priority action. The integrity and authenticity of this major heritage component is seriously at risk due to the very bad state of conservation of the stone masonry, the many inconsistent recent additions built with concrete blocks and other inappropriate materials, and the overall total lack of maintenance. Moreover, the structural state of conservation and the same heritage values of this major heritage component have been seriously worsened by the recent implementation of the new sewage system along the Barada river banks.





*Above: The City Wall section along the Barada rive, on the northern border of the Ancient City  
Below: A City Wall section off Al Badawi Street on the southern border of the Ancient City*

The deterioration and the misuse of the historic residential stock are rapidly increasing and represent now the most important issue to be addressed. As mentioned before, in the Ancient City, the deterioration of the residential fabric is largely due to the poor economic conditions of the largest part of the resident population, tenants and owners. Therefore, a diffused decay of the historic and traditional architectural heritage may be observed, which particularly affects the residential component, both the palatial and the vernacular houses.

Several pathologies and forms of physical decay are largely diffused, due to lack of maintenance and/or inappropriate interventions, concerning the roof and waterproofing, the carrying structures and the materials, not to mention the precious ancient decoration



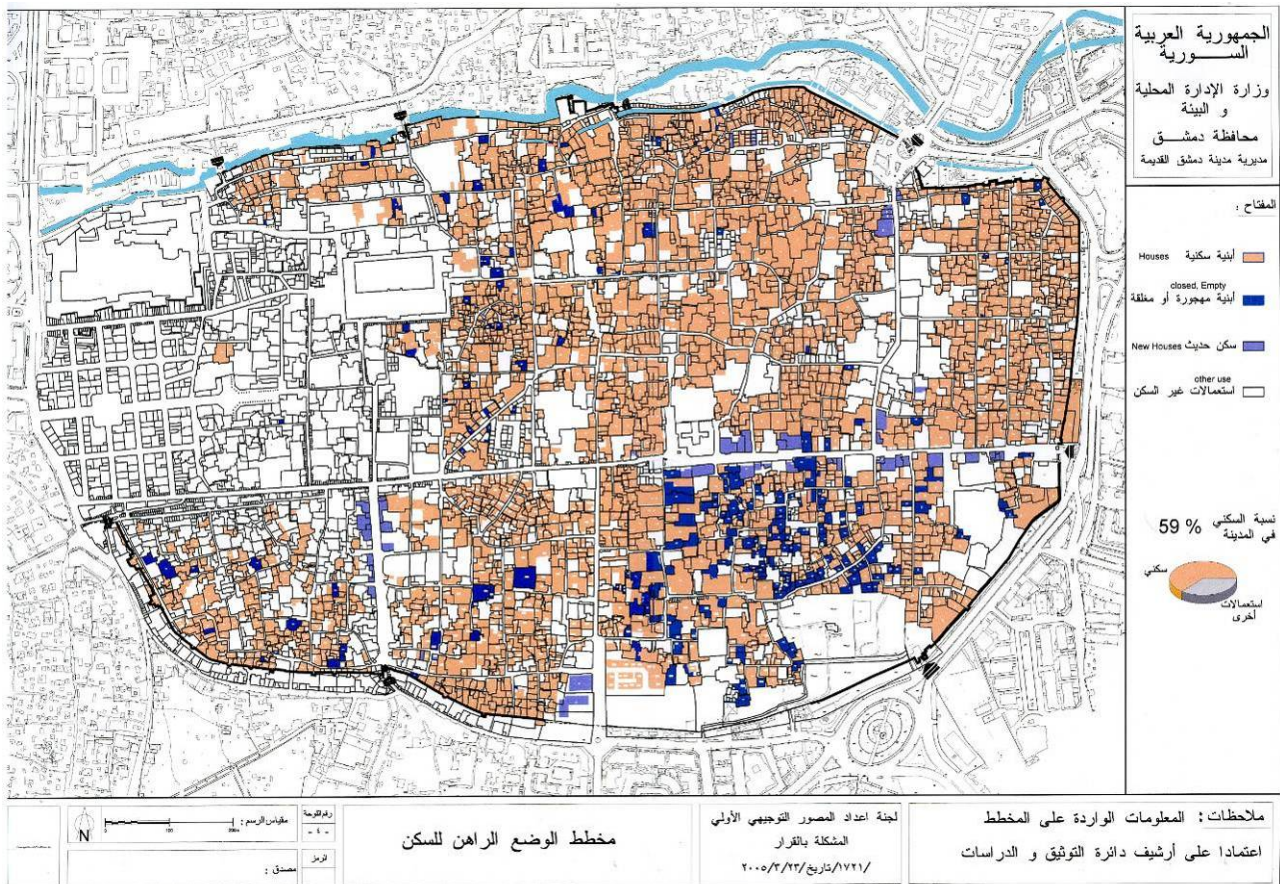
*Some of the most frequent pathologies affecting architectural heritage*

Many houses are empty and in a state of advanced disrepair, particularly in the Jewish quarter, where many properties have been abandoned by the owners and the problem of defining legal tools, which would allow their re-use for housing or other compatible activities, should be faced.

Also, the deterioration of the structural conditions of some buildings may be observed in the same areas where infrastructure works have been undertaken and excavations could represent an additional danger, as it could be seen in some dilapidated facades along the Via Recta, which had to be buttressed.



Left: a deserted palace in the Jewish quarter; right: a dilapidated building along the Via Recta



The residential fabric (light brown). The new houses are shown in blue and the empty houses in dark blue (source: Governorate of Damascus - Directorate of Old Damascus)

In recent years however a relevant trend to restore and rebuild has been noted. As for houses and shops, in 2006 – 2007, 576 building permits were delivered for restoration interventions and 45 for rebuilding in the Ancient City “intra muros”.

In this context, it is to be observed that perhaps several interventions of rebuilding could have been avoided through sensitive and accurate interventions of conservation. In most of the cases, due to the building permits control based on the cadastral map of 1926, these respect the previous footprint and volume and do not result in a rupture of the urban fabric, even if the adopted building techniques and materials are often inappropriate and ordinary, and may represent a loss in the heritage values.

In few cases however, recent interventions have implied large demolitions and redevelopment without respecting the texture of the historic fabric, and definitely represent a harmful precedent contrasting with the proclaimed efforts of preserving the integrity of the WH property. These mainly concern:

- The mosque built in the last decade aside Bab Faradis, not far from the Omayyad Mosque, whose volume and architectural typology totally contrast with the surrounding neighbourhood;
- The building site on Medhat Pasha Street (Via Recta), undertaken for the construction of a cultural centre not far from Maktab Anbar, and temporarily stopped due to the undergoing infrastructure works along the street. The project, due to strong political sensitivity, did not run through the normal building permit procedure, and the competent authority declared not to have received the technical documents. The mission however, on the basis of the size of the site and the type of the structural works, suppose that the intervention could result in an inconsistent volume creating another rupture of the urban fabric, in a very sensitive place - the physical core of the World Heritage site.



*Left: the new mosque near Bab Faradis, right: the building site on Medhat Pasha Street (Via Recta)*

## 3.2. Recent developments in conservation of the Old City

### 3.2.1 Urban upgrading and rehabilitation

Several programs have been undertaken and are envisaged, which aim at rehabilitating the urban fabric and some of its main heritage components. These mainly concern:

- The infrastructure improvement and renovation;
- The housing rehabilitation;
- The restoration of the City Walls;
- The restoration of the Citadel

#### Infrastructure improvement and renovation

The most important program consists of the comprehensive renovation of the infrastructural network, concerning the main spine of the Ancient City – the Medhat Pasha street, also called the “Via Recta” – and the major perpendicular streets of the roman grid. The program is due to be implemented in 2008, with a complex and integrated set of interventions, which would result in the physical upgrading and rehabilitation of a large section of the WH site.



Plan of the current infrastructure improvements in the Ancient City (source: Governorate of Damascus - Directorate of Old Damascus)

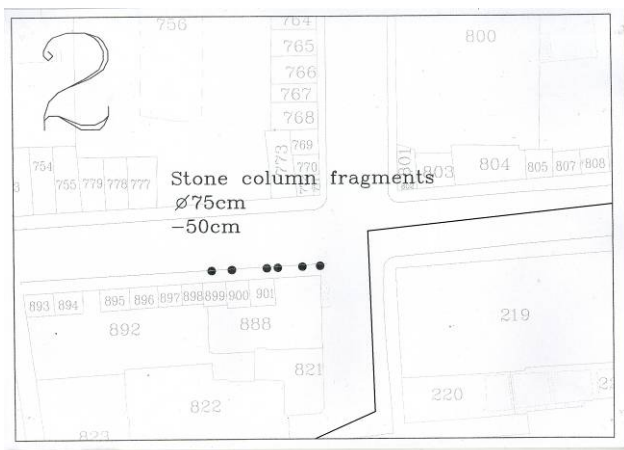
The works undertaken include namely:

- the implementation of a new network of canalisation (sewage, water supply, drainage), which would replace the previous ones dating from the Ottoman and French periods;

- the renovation of the electrical network, removing aerial cables and creating an underground system;
- the repaving of the streets and public spaces along the whole major spine of the Via Recta ;
- the cleaning and refurbishment of the facades on both sides of the Via Recta

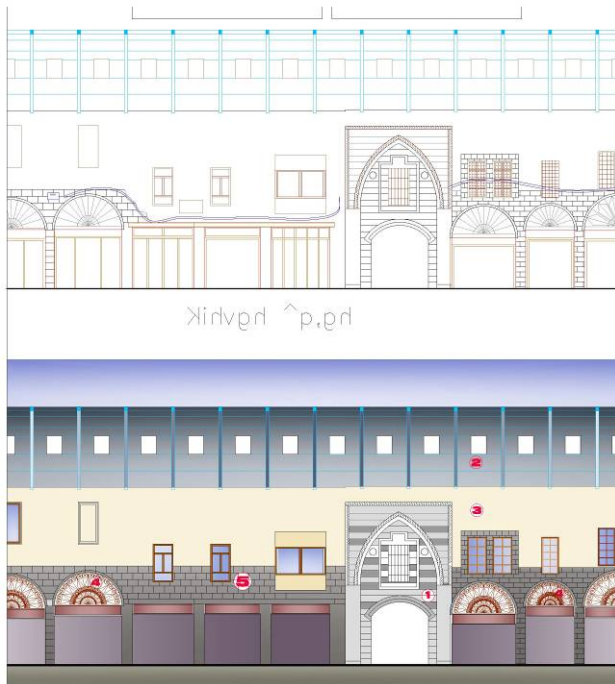
These works represent a fundamental step forward to the physical and environmental rehabilitation of the Ancient City and will undoubtedly contribute to its economic and social revitalisation, but it is essential to stress that they also have important and sensitive implications on the understanding and presentation of the different historic aspects and layers of the concerned sites. To this regard the adopted heritage conservation methods and procedures raise several critical issues.

On the one hand, it has to be observed that the excavations to construct the new underground canalisations could have been the occasion to undertake systematic archaeological studies on the roman city and the subsequent layers of urban development, and to present the findings in an appropriate urban setting. Unfortunately, due to time and budget limitations, the works have been carried out by the Directorate of the Old City without a previous archaeological impact assessment and, apparently, with insufficient supervision by competent staff. Now the impressive bulk of archaeological remains brought to light along the thread of the roman street, though documented *in situ* during the works with the involvement ex-post of the DGAM, is to be inventoried but no further program of research and presentation seems to be envisaged.



Left: *in situ* documentation of the archaeological finds; right: some of the finds on the Via Recta

On the other hand, it has to be stressed that the infrastructure improvements have been strategically combined with an extensive program of refurbishment and restoration of the street fronts. With no doubt, the intervention is certainly about to rejuvenate and upgrade the Souk Medhat Pasha and the many derelict buildings and public spaces along the Via Recta. However, even if the quality of the materials and the execution are quite appropriate, and testify of a very effective site implementation management, these important works suffer from an uniform and sometimes insensitive design that do not cope in many cases with the internationally established conservation requirements.



Above: the restoration of the Souk Medhat Pasha; Below left : the renovation of the street front on the western side of Medhat Pasha street and, below right, the remodelling of the public space at Bab Sharqiat the eastern end of the Via Recta

### Housing rehabilitation

A program for housing rehabilitation in the whole Old City is being studied at the Governorate of Old Damascus in collaboration with the German Cooperation (GTZ). Based on the experience carried out in Aleppo, it includes the set-up of a loan system for low income residents and the development of an appropriate technical assistance, in the framework of a larger project that would also include the rehabilitation of the khan.

### The City Walls restoration

A comprehensive program of restoration of the City Walls is also envisaged by the Governorate of Old Damascus, which would consist of the following:

- The cleaning and restoration of the stone masonry,
- The demolition of the illegal buildings recently built upon or aside the Wall;
- The refurbishment of the other building additions dating from different historic periods.



The program is being studied, and no information is available yet concerning the extent of the envisaged works and the restoration method that would be adopted. The early elaborations presented to the experts clearly show the intention to “beautify” the building additions in order to make them compatible with the historical setting.



*The type of interventions being studied for the restoration of the City Walls (source: Governorate of Damascus - Directorate of Old Damascus)*

### *The Rehabilitation and Reuse of the Citadel*

A project for the rehabilitation and reuse of the Citadel has been undertaken by the Italian Cooperation, in collaboration with the DGAM. So far some works of restoration are being implemented, which concern the two towers and the Ayubid Hall, whilst the “northern corridor” will be restored and used for the presentation of a rich collection of mosaics from different archaeological excavations in the country.

These works are intended to be the first step toward the establishment of new cultural activities in the Citadel, also in connection with the renovation and reorganisation of the National Museum of Damascus, in order to preserve the architectural complex and open it to the public, creating new functional and spatial connections between the Old City and the City Centre.

### **3.2.2 The King Faysal Street Project**

One of the issues of the document on the Ancient City of Damascus submitted to the World Heritage Committee at its last session was the urban redevelopment project of the King Faisal Street.

The negative impact that project would have had on the World Heritage property had been generally pointed out in the recommendations of several local and international initiatives organised on the subject (workshop, press campaign).

The State Party invited a WHC mission to discuss the results of the study carried out on this issue by a Local Committee, set up by the Ministry of Culture and composed by 18 national experts. The WHC experts visited Damascus in December 2007; they confirmed without any doubt that the King Faisal Street Project would have affected an area that belongs to the historic fabric of Old Damascus, though it is not included in the perimeter of the World Heritage site delimited by the walls thread.

The results of the studies carried out by the Local Committee of experts were totally agreed by the December mission: the project would have implied a serious threat for the integrity of the whole historic fabric and the meaning itself of the WH site of the “walled city”. This would have remained definitely separated from its northern suburbs, with negative effects on its environmental conditions

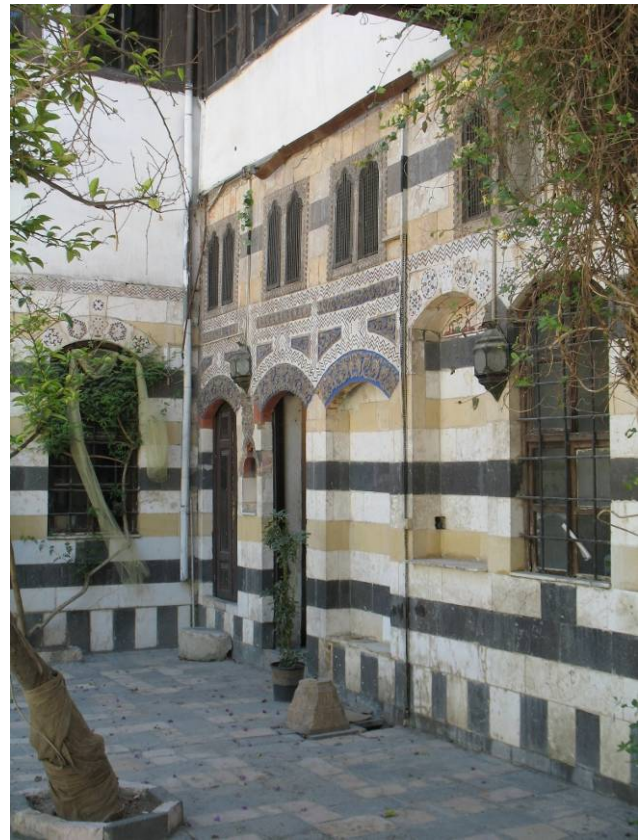
and economic and social vitality that would have added to the deterioration of its urban fabric and heritage values.

On the other hand, during the meetings with the promoter of the urban redevelopment project, the December mission was informed that the original project, which was the result of a competition, had been abandoned and that a new proposal was under preparation.

This joint ICOMOS/UNESCO mission has been officially informed by the representative of the Governorate that the urban redevelopment project has been cancelled, where only the component related to the restoration of the City Walls will be implemented.

### 3.2.3 Architectural heritage conservation

A remarkable effort in the conservation of the major architectural heritage has been made in recent years by the Directorate of Old Damascus and the DGAM. Besides the accurate maintenance of the palaces used for public administration and museums, several buildings and complexes of the highest architectural interest have been restored to house cultural institutions or administrative functions. These interventions fully respect the heritage value and represent a relevant contribution to the tourism attraction and the vitality of the Old City.





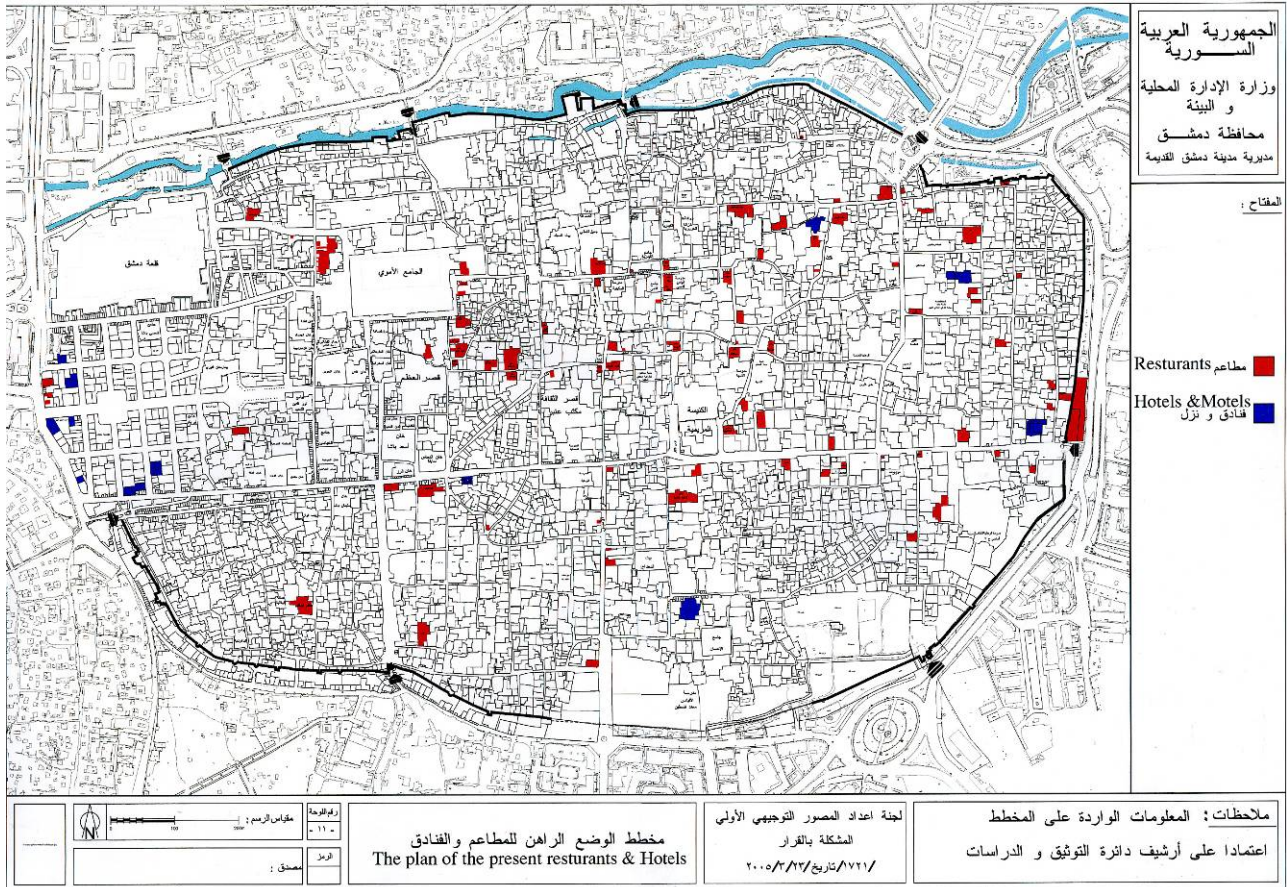
*Recent and undergoing restoration works on public buildings. Above: left, Khan Asad Basha; right, Beit Nizam. Below: left, Beit Sibai ; right, Beit Qowaitli*

Private interventions in conservation are mainly related to investments in tourism, commercial, and cultural activities. In particular there has been in recent years a relevant increase of restaurants and hotels<sup>7</sup> in the Ancient City that mainly occurred through the adaptive reuse of historic buildings, often with relevant heritage values. Many of the recently opened hotels have few rooms or suites (10-20) but cater to an upper level service for international tourists and promote the heritage value of the building as a main feature.

With no doubt this trend represents an important opportunity to ensure the economic vitality of the Ancient City and to provide the financial resources that are necessary to preserve such a rich and widespread architectural heritage. However, this phenomenon requires to be carefully observed and monitored because, to a large extent, it has probably reached the threshold of compatibility with the need to ensure sustainability to conservation. On the one hand, the effects of such investments on the real estate market are evident and risk to hamper investments in other less profitable sectors; on the other hand, the commercial exploitation of the heritage values of the buildings (and urban context) seems to generate, in some cases, an attitude that definitely contrasts with the requirement of preserving the integrity and the authenticity of the heritage.

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<sup>7</sup> At the end of 2007, the Ancient city counted 98 restaurants ( whose 34 opened in the period 2005-2007) and 46 hotels.



Hotels and Restaurants (source: Governorate of Damascus - Directorate of Old Damascus)



Two heritage buildings converted into hotels in the Ancient city (left) and Qanawat (right)

In recent years an interesting and positive process of adaptive re-use has started in the Jewish quarter, with the informal constitution of an “artist quarter”. Some 16 “ateliers” and exhibition rooms have been opened in the last 4-5 years in deserted buildings of different architectural quality. This represents a remarkable way of reusing a building stock which lays in complete disrepair, and is bringing new life in the most derelict quarter of the city, adding to his attraction as a destination for “cultural tourism”. It also poses the central issue of the legal and financial tools to be set-up in order to make possible a more diffused re-use of the abandoned properties in the quarter.



*A house converted into “atelier” and exhibition hall in the Jewish quarter*

Concerning the techniques and the materials, in many private restoration worksites, especially in case of “rebuilding” interventions, it can be noted that the use of “traditional” materials and techniques is mostly limited to the visible external finish of the facades. For instance, most of the mud bricks and timber structures are dismantled to be replaced by modern and inconsistent hollow brick.



*Worksites with inconsistent materials: left, during the works; right, the final visible result*

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A remarkable effort in the conservation of the major architectural heritage has been made in recent years by the Directorate of Old Damascus and the DGAM.

The issues of urban rehabilitation in the WH site of the Ancient City of Damascus are nowadays addressed by several projects and studies carried out by different administrations and institutions, and the need to ensure a consequent effort in conservation seems to be largely shared by all the concerned bodies.

Nevertheless many of the recent and ongoing interventions still demonstrate that more sensitive planning, architectural and archaeological approaches need to be adopted, which would consider the whole historic urban fabric, and not only the individual registered monuments, as an heritage to be preserved.

The state of conservation of the Old City has now reached a critical point, as the issues raised by the World Heritage Committee at its last session demonstrate:

- the need is urgent to ensure a better coordination amongst the various public institutions, both in performing the planning process and in implementing the most relevant projects;
- the new planning tools under preparation should provide a clear definition of the different levels of protection to be applied to the different parts of the urban fabric and to the specific elements of heritage value, with an accurate identification of the types of interventions required or permitted, based on the conspicuous information made available from the surveys carried out in the recent years;
- an effort has to be made to raise awareness amongst officials and public opinion about heritage values of the Old City, and to increase management capacities and technical skills on conservation methods and techniques.

In relation to the specific issues raised:

- the King Faisal Urban Redevelopment project has been effectively cancelled;
- the definition of a buffer zone for the Old City is in the agenda of the State Party;
- the vast on-going and planned infrastructures works are welcome, but a more scientific approach in the archaeological issues applying the international standards would be necessary, in particular the archaeological impact assessment for the upcoming works should be carried out;
- the construction of the new cultural centre on the Via Recta is seriously regrettable and it is urgent that the competent authorities acquire the necessary information on the project, transmit them to the WHC, and study how to mitigate the negative impact on the values of the urban historic context;
- specific projects to improve the public spaces should be undertaken, respecting and enhancing the heritage values of the archaeological remains and the architectural heritage of the Old City;
- a comprehensive conservation and rehabilitation strategy for housing improvement in the Old Damascus has to be developed and implemented;
- a comprehensive study of traffic and transportation in the city centre is necessary, taking in consideration the specific issues of accessibility to the Old City, and the needs to preserve its fabric from further heavy infrastructure and urban renewal interventions;
- the Conservation and Development Plan should be revised and completed in order to enforce a more appropriate and detailed regulation, including the compulsory use of traditional materials and techniques in the restoration works.

## **ANNEX 1 LIST OF PEOPLE MET**

### **Permanent Delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic to UNESCO**

H. E. Mr Ghassan Nseir, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Delegate.

### **Governorate of Damascus**

- Eng. Bassam Jairoudieh, Executive Bureau Member
- Eng. Amjad Alrez, Manager of Old Damascus

### **General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM)**

- Dr Bassam Jamous, Director-General
- Dr. Ghazwan Yaghi, Director, Office for the preservation of the Old City of Damascus
- Mr. Houman Saad, Head of excavation Unit of the Old City of Damascus
- Ms Lena Kutefan, Head of Site Management Department
- Ms Nada Alhawli, Responsible of Old Damascus Site Management
- Dr Michel Al Maqdissi, Head of archaeological researches Department

### **Municipal Administration Modernisation (MAM)**

- Eng. Erfan Ali, Director MAM
- Dr. Abir Arkawi, Historic City Development expert
- Dr. David Michelmor, consultant

### **International Cooperation**

- Eng. Regina Kallmayer, German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), Project manager, Rehabilitation of the Old City of Damascus
- Arch. Giancarlo Barbato, Expert, Project Management Unit of the Rehabilitation of the Citadel of Damascus.

## **ANNEX 2 SCHEDULE OF THE MISSION**

### **Wednesday 23 April 2008**

Afternoon/night Arrival at Damascus. First field visit accompanied by Mr. Amjad Al Rez, of the Directorate of Old Damascus, Damascus Governorate.

Meeting with the representative of GTZ, Eng. Regina Kallmayer

### **Thursday 24 April 2008**

Morning and afternoon: Meeting at Old Damascus Directorate with representatives of the Damascus Governorate (Eng. Bassam Jerudieh, Eng. Amjad El Riz + staff), the DGAM (Dr. Bassam Jamous , Dr. Ghazwan Yaghi, Ms Lena Kutefan + staff) and the Permanent Delegate of Syria to UNESCO: General Overview of Old Damascus conservation issues, the plans and the interventions planned or carried out by the Municipality;

Visit to Old Damascus with the representatives of the Governorate and the DGAM: main monuments, restored buildings, ongoing infrastructural works.

### **Friday 25 April 2008**

Morning Visit to the Citadel and meeting with Mr Giancarlo Barbato, expert of the Italian Cooperation for the Rehabilitation project.

Afternoon Field visit.

### **Saturday 26 April 2008**

Morning and afternoon: Visit to the World Heritage site of Bosra; discussion with the DGAM staff on the buffer zone.

### **Sunday 27 April 2008**

Morning Meeting with Dr. Eng. Erfan Ali and Ms Abir Arkawi of the MAM Programme: discussion on the issues related to the Old City conservation.

Afternoon Field visit.

Meeting at Old Damascus Directorate with representatives of the Damascus Governorate (Eng. Bassam Jerudieh, Eng. Amjad El Riz + staff), the DGAM (Dr. Ghazwan Yaghi + staff) to discuss the findings of the mission.

### **Monday 28 April 2008**

Morning Visit to some restoration projects in the historical neighbourhood of ..

Meeting at Old Damascus Directorate with the responsible of different departments involved in the Old City management (infrastructures, buffer zone) and visits to restored monuments in the Old City.

Afternoon Visit to the Jewish quarter and Mr Mustafa Ali's atelier to discuss on the the "art quarter project" for the possible rehabilitation of the area. Working on the report.

### **Tuesday 29 April 2008**

Morning Meeting with DGAM departments (Protected Sites Management, Archaeological researches)

Afternoon Departure



## ANNEX 3 DOCUMENT AND DECISION 31COM 7B.58 OF THE WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE AT ITS LAST SESSION (JULY 2007)

### 58. Ancient City of Damascus (Syria) (C 20)

#### Year of inscription on the World Heritage List

1979

#### Criteria

(i) (ii) (iii) (iv) (vi)

#### Year(s) of inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger

N/A

#### Previous Committee Decisions

17 COM VIII.3; 21 COM IV.57.a

#### International Assistance

Total amount allocated to the property: USD 149,690 for Technical Cooperation.

#### UNESCO Extra-budgetary Funds

Total amount allocated to the property: USD 3,900 for an expert technical mission in March 2007.

#### Previous monitoring missions

World Heritage Centre missions in December 1993 and March 2007.

#### Main threats identified in previous reports

- a) Poor state of conservation;
- b) Inappropriate restoration techniques;
- c) Lack of a buffer zone;
- d) Lack of a management plan.

#### Current conservation problems

Since its inscription on the World Heritage List, the conservation of the Ancient City of Damascus has not been addressed in a comprehensive study and no global conservation actions have been taken. It is urgent to point out that the state of conservation of the property is very poor. Although the main monuments and buildings are more or less well conserved, the urban fabric has considerably degraded since the inscription of the Ancient City of Damascus on the World Heritage List.

Several single monuments were and are being restored, however inappropriate restoration techniques are often used within the property: for example, in the Ayyubid building al-Madrassa al-Adliyah (7<sup>th</sup> century AD), Ayyubid ashlar stones have been partially cut and covered with mechanically cut stones cladding in large portions of the monument; this technique had been previously used also in the Roman perimeter of the Great Omeyyade Mosque of Damascus and was stopped following UNESCO recommendations in 1997. In private dwellings and in all historical buildings in general, reconstructions in cement are allowed provided that the original forms are reproduced; the use of the traditional construction techniques in timber structure and mud bricks is not compulsory.

In addition, two alarming recent developments within the inscribed property have occurred without the World Heritage Centre being informed: several housing units have been destroyed in two locations to allow for new constructions, one adjacent to the Sitt Ruqiyah Mosque and the other situated along the Medhat Pasha Street (the former Roman *cardo*).

Moreover, and despite a World Heritage Centre mission in 2001 in which a definition of a buffer zone was agreed upon in principle with the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, the State Party did not yet officially submit a plan showing the buffer zone to the World Heritage Secretariat.

Nevertheless, in 2006, the State Party undertook a major positive step: the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment produced a "Conservation Action Plan" for the World Heritage property and transmitted it, in Arabic, to the World Heritage Centre. This Plan - that is still to be endorsed by several governmental agencies before its implementation is allowed - provides a comprehensive analysis of the conservation problems of the property and lists a series of remedial actions on the urban level. Although the Action Plan needs to be modified in some areas, mainly by cancelling the idea of a ring road around the city walls, and by updating the urban regulations and technical requirements of restoration works, its implementation can contribute to considerably improving the property's physical conditions.

Within the framework of the implementation of the proposed "Action Plan", all infrastructure services within the property will be buried. Therefore, any underground excavations that are planned should be supervised by competent and vigilant archaeologists, since these excavations will concern valuable and highly informative archaeological evidence that constitutes an intrinsic part of the property's value.

In a recent World Heritage Centre mission to Syria (January 2007), the Governor of Damascus informed the Centre of a large scale project that involves the Malik Faisal area, tangent to the northern perimeter of the city walls. The project foresees to demolish the whole area, including large portions of the historical urban fabric inscribed on the National Register - that form part of the agreed upon buffer zone -, "clear" the constructions that hide the city walls, replace them with gardens, and, build a new 32 meter wide road parallel to the city walls, partly covering the Barada river that runs in this area.

The World Heritage Centre informed the State Party during the January 2007 mission and by letter immediately upon return, of the negative impact that this project would have on the World Heritage property, and on the necessity to inform the World Heritage Committee, as per the *Operational Guidelines*, before such a project is implemented. The State Party reacted by inviting the World Heritage Centre, in March 2007, to advise on the modifications that need to be done, and to take part as well in a national meeting on the Malik Faisal project, involving all the stakeholders. To answer this request, the World Heritage Centre dispatched a senior urban planner and a member of the Secretariat to Damascus from 28 March to 2 April. The members of the mission concluded that the planned project on the World Heritage property would have tangible and immediate negative effects on the property's historical and heritage values, and harmful impact on the human, social, and economic levels. Moreover, the members of the mission highlighted the fact that the historical suburbs concerned by the Governorate's project undeniably constitute a natural buffer zone to the property.

Finally, the mission underlined that, as mentioned in the *Operational Guidelines* (paragraphs 178 and 179), a World Heritage property - as defined in Articles 1 and 2 of the *Convention* - can be inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger by the Committee in the cases of ascertained danger due to "serious deterioration of materials" and/or "serious deterioration of structure and/or ornamental features", or potential danger because of "lack of conservation policy" and/or "threatening effects of regional planning projects". Concern is indeed raised by the project foreseen in the northern outskirts of the property because of its negative and significant impact.

The World Heritage Centre communicated these conclusions by letter to the State Party on 23 April 2007, and proposed to support the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in planning an implementing an alternative pilot project for the urban rehabilitation of the Malik Faisal area, before the end of the year 2008 in which Damascus has been designated as the Capital of Culture for the Arab World.

At the time of drafting this document, no answer was officially received by the World Heritage Centre regarding the possible decision of cancelling the project foreseen in the Malik Faisal area. Such a decision would be indispensable for the protection of the World Heritage Property's integrity and open the way to reinforced cooperation with the Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in the field of urban rehabilitation.

#### 58. Ancient City of Damascus (Syrian Arab Republic) (C 20)

**Decision:** 31 COM 7B.58

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC-07/31.COM/7B.Add,
2. Notes with satisfaction that the State Party has prepared an Action Plan for the conservation of the property;
3. Encourages the State Party to implement the Action Plan provided that:
  - a) Any ring road around the property must respect the integrity of the property;
  - b) Infrastructure works are planned and implemented under high quality archaeological supervision;
  - c) The legal framework for the protection of the property is improved and detailed;
  - d) The use of traditional restoration techniques within the property becomes compulsory to guarantee the preservation of the property's integrity;
4. Urges the State Party to refrain from undertaking any demolition work within the property and its buffer zone, in case such work impacts on the integrity of the property;
5. Invites the State Party to consider extending the boundaries of the property in order to include its valuable historical neighbourhoods and requests the State Party to define the boundaries of the proposed buffer zone and to officially provide a map of this zone to the World Heritage Centre for approval by the Committee;
6. Requests the State Party, in accordance with Paragraph 172 of the *Operational Guidelines*, to inform the World Heritage Centre in advance of any planned changes and any foreseen project within and around the property;
7. Further requests the State Party to invite a joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS mission in order to assess the situation and to submit to the World Heritage Centre, by **1 February 2008**, a progress report on the above recommendations and on the state of conservation of the property for examination by the Committee at its 32nd session in 2008.