

Stefan Weber, *Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation (1808-1918)*, Vol. I: *Text*, pp. 464, Vol. II: *Catalogue*, pp. 664, Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus V (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2009), ISBN 978-87-7934-424-2.

Unlike Aleppo, which was a major commercial centre during the Ottoman period, Damascus was more linked to its hinterland. It also benefited from being the centre of the pilgrim caravan that departed annually to the Hijaz carrying about 15 to 20,000 pilgrims from Anatolia, the Balkans, and even Persia. The caravan generated much commercial activity in Damascus and its hinterland. To validate the newly-acquired title of the Ottoman sultan as Protector of the Two Holy Sanctuaries and to provide services to the pilgrims, *tekkes* (compounds of mosques and living quarters), mosques and *khans* (caravansaries) were built in Damascus to accommodate pilgrims and troops accompanying them. The mosques were built in the Rumi (Ottoman) style with pencil-shaped minarets that dominated the city's skyline and represented the core of Ottoman imperial architecture in the provinces.

The use of steamships in the nineteenth century made most pilgrims opt for travel by sea to the Hijaz because it was cheaper and safer. Damascus then lost the enormous revenue that accrued to it from the pilgrim caravan. At the same time, Damascus began to open up to the growing influence of industrial and revolutionary Europe, first during Egyptian rule in Syria in the 1830s and then through the application of the Ottoman European-style reforms known as the *Tanzimat* (edicts of reform). Damascus then began to shed away its conservatism and to undergo deep socioeconomic changes. The urban structure of the city was completely transformed in this process.

Studies about the impact of the political, economic and social conditions on urban planning in Ottoman Damascus are scarce. Stefan Weber's work, therefore, is a major contribution to the field. His stated aim is to document the scope and character of the architectural, urban and social restructuring of Damascus in the last century of Ottoman rule and to understand the transformations of the city in its wider context. Weber has the linguistic skills, the training as an urban historian, and the ability to combine architectural evidence with textual sources which enabled him to comprehend the encounter between the established modes of urban structure and the need for change and adaptability in the built environment.

Weber begins his study with the year 1808 when the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) succeeded the murdered sultan Selim III, who was

the first reforming sultan but was opposed by the corrupt Janissaries and the conservative *ulema*. Sultan Mahmud succeeded in eliminating the Janissaries and containing the power of the *ulema*. The study ends in 1918 with the Ottoman withdrawal from Syria.

Weber discusses in volume 1, titled “Text”, the historical and cultural context of the built environment in Damascus. He focuses on the rupture that had occurred in the social and urban organization between the early modern and the modern era in which globalization, European imperialism, the greater speed of trade and communications challenged local economies, mentalities and social structures and changed cities around the world. He divides the volume into an introduction and three chapters. In the chapter titled “Protagonists of Change”, Weber gives an overview of the relations between the Ottoman state and Damascene society. He deals with centralization and Ottomanization and the strategies of Ottoman reform in Damascus. He also discusses the sources of urban and social development by highlighting the Damascene families who had successful careers during the time of the Tanzimat and who reflected their success and wealth by building sumptuous residences. Weber also speaks of the influence of European consuls and foreigners who constituted a new force in Damascene society.

In the chapter on “Witnesses of Change”, Weber discusses the Ottoman architectural history of Damascus. He underlines the institutions and organization of urban building with emphasis on the role of religious endowments (*vakıfs/waqfs*) and the authorities who were behind public works and urban development. He then elaborates on urban development in Damascus in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by pointing to the emergence of new districts and the role of transport and infrastructures in their creation. Weber focuses on Marja Square and the building of government buildings there, such as the *Saray* (seat of government) and the City Hall (*al-Baladiyya*), and then discusses the building of the *Ghuraba* Hospital, also known as *al-Hamidi* Hospital, after Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) that was built toward the end of the nineteenth century. Other public forums include parks, cafés, theatres, and cinemas.

Weber also discusses the *suq* (bazaar) and bazaar streets, such as Suq Midhat Basha, called after Damascus governor Midhat Paşa (1878-1880) and also known as the Biblical Straight Street (Via Recta), where St. Paul walked after his conversion to Christianity. Weber also mentions Suq al-Hamidiyya, called after Sultan Abdülhamid II, which was formerly known as Suq al-Arwam, a reference to the Ottomans who had replaced the Byzantines to whom the early Arab Muslims referred as Rum. Other commercial

buildings discussed include hotels, banks and newly-built business buildings. Most of the chapter, however, deals with private houses and the transformations they went through from the traditional courtyard houses to new types of houses combining the traditional courtyard with building innovations.

The chapter entitled “Aspects of the Transformation” elaborates on the theme of new spaces for a new state, by focusing on the architecture of the administrative buildings and murals as an expression of Ottoman identity. A new age in urban planning and architecture bringing the world closer together was taking place in Damascus at the time. Weber concludes the first volume by commenting in broad outline on the changes that Damascus and the Damascenes had experienced during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Weber argues that the changes in the administration and in the political and economic conditions in Damascus in the nineteenth century are not only reflected in the structure of Damascene society but also in the urban development of the city. The new government institutions, the establishment of a modern army which needed barracks and hospitals, the increase of the population due to advanced medical care after the introduction of the quarantine, and also the influx of refugees (*muhajirin*) from other parts of the empire causing the population of Damascus to increase from around 120,000 in 1850 to 150,000 by 1875, to 200,000 at the turn of the century, and reaching 240,000 in 1918 greatly affected the urban structure of the city. The increase led to a considerable expansion in the built environment. In 1901, for example, an unusual building activity occurred, and the number of houses (*khane*) reached a total of 16,832 houses, according to the *sal-name* (Ottoman year-book). The increase in population, argues Weber, necessitated the building of infrastructure networks, such as roads, railways, telegraph and other municipal buildings to cope with the city’s expansion.

Moving from public buildings to private houses, Weber underlines the fact that houses are the real treasure of Damascus architecture and are the most personal units in the built environment. They also illustrate the extent of cultural change in Damascus in the nineteenth century. The traditional aspects of most houses prior to the new techniques of modernization were the courtyard around which spread rooms to which a narrow entrance led from the outside door to conceal the privacy of family life. Alleys with dead ends were common to prevent passersby from frequenting them. A notable’s house could have two courtyards: one to receive visitors and the other for private life. The jewel of the house, according to Weber, was the

qa'a (prestigious living-room) with its magnificent wall paintings, its *'ataba* (entrance area where guests usually take off their shoes) and *tazar* (raised seating area).

Describing Damascene houses in the traditional period prior to the nineteenth century, Weber makes the important observation that it would be a mistake to classify houses by the religious affiliation of their builders and dwellers. Rather, the key distinction between houses lies in the level of income - a factor that was also likely to be expressed in different practices. Weber, however, makes an exception when he states that the religious themes, including small symbols in sculptural stonework and inscriptions, represent the only difference between the houses of Muslim, Christian and Jewish families.

The architectural innovations that spread in Damascus in the nineteenth century, such as baroque motifs, murals and extensive stone carvings, and were mainly inspired by European and Ottoman models were, according to Weber, initially copied and modified in Istanbul and subsequently filtered into the provinces. The people's response to the challenge of modernity was not rejection but adaptation by combining the European models with local forms and traditions.

Houses in the nineteenth century introduced the *salah*, also rendered as *salıye* (hall or reception room) which, contrary to the earlier *qa'a* which had *'ataba* and *tazar*, was on the same level of the courtyard. It is a rectangular flat room that holds chairs, tables and cupboards which had become popular for domestic use since the early decades of the nineteenth century. The traditional wall niches were greatly reduced. European-style furniture was used in the *salah* and furniture dealers began to use the French term "style" (rendered as "steel" in colloquial Arabic) to promote products in imitation of European furniture, especially the furniture belonging to either the French king Louis XIV which was imposing, or to Louis XVI which was smaller in size, in reflection of the power of both kings.

Another development that impressively illustrates the extent of cultural change in Damascus in the late nineteenth century, according to Weber, is the introduction of a new house design known as the *konak* (Turkish for a grand residential house or roughly mansion). With no courtyard, it has a central hall, a sofa (*sufa*), which provides access to the adjacent rooms, has two storeys with tiled roofs and structured street façades with large windows. There could also be courtyard houses with *konak* façades and sofa. Detached *konaks* do not occur in the old part of the city.

The lower middle class still preferred the courtyard house but on a smaller scale than before. The poor lived in *hawshs* which are houses built

for several families in the periphery of the city. To accommodate refugees from the regions lost to the empire, terraced courtyard houses with reduced size were built. With the break-up of the traditional extended families, apartment houses for smaller families increased in number at the turn of the twentieth century. These changes, according to Weber, represent a growing trend among the people to leave the old town and live in smaller one-family houses. Weber concludes that with the exception of a few terraced courtyard houses hardly any courtyard houses were built in the 1920s and 1930s. The low-priced housing in the old town appealed to those coming mostly from the rural regions who could not buy houses and apartments in the new developing quarters of Damascus. The remodeling of old houses and the building of new ones are, for Weber, more than pure architectural spaces; they are venues for negotiating social status, power and influence, and they are a medium to advertise changes in social status.

Weber also challenges the widely-held view among specialists that the Islamic city maintains a strict segregation of residential and commercial quarters. This view is untenable in the case of Damascus. Examples are given of many private houses that are located in the bazaar area, most of which go back to the eighteenth century. The building projects of the 'Azm governors in Damascus in the eighteenth century are a case in point. Even today with the expansion of the bazaar and the increase in population, numerous private houses, especially in old Damascus, are being completely or partially transformed into commercial buildings.

Weber's second volume titled "Catalogue" includes historical description and comments with super coloured illustrations of most of the one thousand plus buildings and public spaces in Damascus arranged in categories, a term Weber uses alternately with catalogue. The illustrations containing beautiful photographs of buildings obtained from a variety of sources including the author's own collection are difficult to come across in a single work. Weber is keen to emphasize that the catalogue is more than simply an inventory of buildings. It tracks building activities, including new building work, alterations and restoration, and also records the founding of new institutions in existing buildings based on evidence available to the author. The table of contents in this volume includes appendices, catalogue or categories of buildings, and also a concordance which gives an exhaustive list of the relevant sources, a detailed glossary, an index, and seven folded plans of Damascus showing mostly the location of public and commercial buildings.

There are three appendices, the first of which gives the names of the 141 members of the city council (*al-baladiyya*) of Damascus between 1871 and 1900, who included Christians and Jews alongside Muslims, as reported in

the *salname*. The mixing of members from the three religious communities is a reflection of the growing Arab secular movement at the time. It is significant in this regard that the Syrian General Council that convened in Damascus in June 1919 at the time of the Arab government and later elected Amir Faysal as King of Syria on 8 March 1920 included 11 members from Damascus, eight of whom were Muslims, two Christians, and one Jewish. Appendix 2 gives the number of cafés that existed in Damascus in 1898–99 as 192, according to the *salname*, of which Weber lists 21. Appendix 3 mentions 60 establishments, such as houses and public buildings, which have murals on their walls, ceilings or cornice with motifs representing Istanbul, the Bosphorus, the *tuğra* (the sultan's seal), Italian landscape, Paris, railways, hunting scenes, warships, aircrafts, and steamships, which indicate the Ottoman and European impact on architecture in Damascus.

Under catalogue, the author discusses with illustrations and historical notes the different categories of the buildings in Damascus arranged according to their use. These are classified alphabetically, such as administration and post, banks, bridges, cafés, churches together with monasteries and synagogues, consulates, commercial buildings and so on. The bulk of the discussed buildings are, however, grouped under general categories, such as commercial buildings covered in 43 pages, educational institutions, including Muslim, non-Muslim, and missionary schools in 40 pages, mosques and similar, that is *turbas* (tombs) and *zawiyas* (sufi retreats) in 38 pages, and residential houses in 300 pages which account for about 45 per cent of the total pages of the second volume. Most of these buildings are documented through local and European writings, *salnames*, Shari'a court records, and, most importantly, the author's own observations and study of the built environment.

Nothing is more indicative of the growing western influence in Damascus than the ten European consulates established there between 1830 and 1900, where none existed before. Many buildings in the early twentieth century were designed by foreign architects one of whom, Raimondo D'Aronco, was the court architect for Sultan Abdülhamid II who designed in 1900 the telegraph monument: a bronze column erected at Marja Square to commemorate the telegraph line linking Istanbul, Damascus, and Mecca. The apex of the column supports a model of the Yıldız mosque in Istanbul. Weber also mentions another foreign architect, the Spanish Fernando de Aranda who designed between 1900 and 1910 the commercial building of the 'Abed family in Damascus which still stands in Marja Square. He also designed the Hijaz Railway station in Damascus as well as the administration building of the Syrian University and its auditorium in 1929.

The most important government educational institution in Damascus, known as Maktab 'Anbar, was established in 1886. It was originally built as a house in 1867 by Yusuf 'Anbar, a Jewish merchant who fell into debt in 1875 and the property passed into the hands of the Ottoman government. Weber describes the house of Yusuf 'Anbar as the second largest and one of the finest houses in Damascus. The first public library in Damascus, later known as al-Zahiriyya, was officially opened in 1880, and the first medical school in Damascus was chartered by Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1901 and opened in 1903–04 teaching medicine in Turkish. In contrast, the American medical school established in Beirut in 1867 by the Syrian Protestant College (renamed the American University of Beirut in 1920) began teaching medicine in Arabic by American Presbyterian medical doctors until it shifted into English in 1882.

Weber also corrects current misconceptions relating to architectural conceptions in Damascus. For example, the Ottoman baroque style cenotaph that stands today next to the Ayyubid wooden cenotaph in the mausoleum of Salah al-Din (Saladin) in Damascus was not as stated offered by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II during his visit to Damascus in 1898. Sultan Abdülhamid II was the one who donated the cenotaph. The Kaiser only presented a Berlin-made laurel wreath elaborately crafted in gilded bronze to mark his visit.

Out of a total of 68 mosques, *turbas* and *zawiya*s mentioned by Weber in Damascus between 1808 and 1918, 45 of them were either renovated (32), or newly built (13) during the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II. The sultan's interest in mosques in Damascus is to be explained by the fact that he declared himself caliph, called for Pan-Islamism, and was a member of the Shadhiliyya Yashrutiyya Sufi *tariqa* (order) in Damascus headed at the time by Shaykh Mahmud Abu al-Shamat for whom Abdülhamid built a *zawiya* in Damascus and addressed him as *sayyidi* (my master).

The nineteenth century is often described as the twilight of Ottoman rule in Syria, yet it witnessed Ottoman attempts to enforce centralization and reform which affected the urban fabric of Damascus. Weber's two-volume study of the built environment in Damascus makes a compelling argument about the relationship between the Ottoman administration and the transformation of Damascus urban planning, citing the proliferation of public buildings in the city which rendered state power more visible. Although Weber repeatedly makes the point that the European architectural impact on the urban layout of Damascus was filtered through Istanbul, he highlights at the same time the persistence of a local architectural heritage and its ability to adapt itself to the changing socioeconomic and

political conditions. Thus, while examining the phases of the alterations that many buildings had gone through, Weber establishes a mini architectural history for each building within the general framework of the city's urban history. Also, by not studying separately, according to religious communities, the 589 residential houses he surveyed in the second volume, Weber has demonstrated a deep understanding of the shared culture linking the communities together over the centuries. In fact, the social structure of neighbourhoods, quarters, streets and alleys in Damascus indicate the mixing of the religious communities in the living space which is a reflection of their mixing in the work place. Weber's study also shows that while there are certain quarters, especially in the periphery of Damascus, that are assigned for the poorer people coming from the rural regions or as refugees, the fact remains that extended Damascene families, who included both rich and poor members, tended to live next to each other, bound by family solidarity, in the same quarters which still carry their names.

Stefan Weber is to be complemented for producing such an outstanding and profoundly impressive work which sets a standard in the field. *Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation, 1808-1918* will be hard to supersede. The Danish Institute in Damascus is also to be commended for including this book in its proceedings.

Abdul-Karim Rafeq
William and Annie Bickers Professor of Arab Middle Eastern Studies,
Emeritus
The College of William and Mary in Virginia
akrafe@wm.edu