

**DAMASCUS: OTTOMAN MODERNITY AND URBAN  
TRANSFORMATION, 1808—1918, VOLS. 1 AND 2**  
**Stefan Weber**

Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2009  
(1,200 pages, bibliography, index, illustrations, maps, enclosed plans)  
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Reviewed by Benjamin Thomas White

Stefan Weber's two-volume study of nineteenth-century Damascus is a monumental achievement. The first volume is, essentially, a splendidly well-illustrated research monograph. The second volume is the catalog of an architectural survey of the city's built heritage in the nineteenth century, including earlier buildings that were significant, or significantly altered, in that period; covering over a thousand individual structures grouped by different social functions, it outlines details of their building, rebuilding, demolition, and more. This survey provides Weber with a rich evidentiary base, which he supplements with primary research in archival and published sources (Damascene, imperial Ottoman, and European) and secondary literature in several languages. Together the two volumes function as a kind of miniature museum of the city's history. Architectural historians will want to spend plenty of time with volume two, but this review will focus mainly on the argument presented in volume one, for which the catalog provides supporting evidence. (All page references are to volume one.)

The urban fabric of Damascus—the city's infrastructure, public buildings, and suqs, as well as the private houses of its inhabitants, both elite and

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ordinary—was, Weber argues, comprehensively transformed in the final Ottoman century. The transformation bears witness to a cultural change, and Weber’s attention to the architectural evidence, from the ground plans of major edifices to tiny details of interior decoration, is always a means to the end of understanding that change. The lives that Damascenes lived in their city, and their understanding of their place within it and within a wider world, were very different by the end of this period. And Damascenes themselves were active protagonists in the transformation.

This involvement of Damascenes in their city’s modernization is Weber’s other key point. While ample literature on cities like Istanbul, Beirut, or Alexandria shows the transformation of Middle Eastern cities under European influence, or through the direct intervention of the Ottoman (in Egypt, khedival) state, Weber takes the example of a major provincial capital where European influence was limited to show us a distinctively Ottoman modernization that was shaped as much by local as by imperial factors, and much less by European ones. It drew some of its impetus from the reforms of the central state, but more from local society’s adoption and adaptation of them. The new administrative system created by centralizing policies such as the provincial reforms of 1864 and 1871 created a supraregional frame of reference for local political and social organization, but at the same time it “greatly strengthened the potential for local political participation” and local control over the city’s development (45). This development was shaped by a fast-growing population and the rise of new notable families. The book tracks it across the period from 1808 to 1918, but focuses more on the second half, especially the three decades of 1868 to 1901 for which the annual reports (*salname*) on the province of Damascus are available.

What were the marks of the transformation? New local institutions, such as the municipal council, together with institutions representing the newly centralized state, like the governorate or the army, were housed in new public buildings, mostly constructed around the new center of Marja Square. The buildings were a material expression of the reform project: they were architecturally distinct and physically separate, as was consistent with the increasing functional differentiation within the state, and their outward-facing, symmetrical design expressed the same principles of order and regularity that lay behind the Tanzimat themselves. But the development of Marja Square was not simply decreed from the center: local actors

also established modern hotels and commercial buildings in the same area, often borrowing both from local norms and the new Ottoman imperial style. Public and private actors together remade commercial buildings across the city, building new ones at Marja while comprehensively renovating and expanding the existing suqs. And Damascene homes, too, were outwardly and inwardly transformed. It is perhaps only because these changes did not involve a Haussmannian project to drill boulevards through the old city that contemporary European travelers tended to miss their significance and described Damascus as much more satisfyingly “oriental” than other modernizing Ottoman cities.

Major infrastructural developments in this long nineteenth century included road construction, the tramway, the Fija water pipeline and associated distribution systems, and electric lighting. Contractors in some of these projects were European companies, but the stimulus came from local actors, institutional or societal, and the local administration oversaw their functioning (and in some cases financing). Planning included the development of new quarters, notably at Muhajirin, laid out according to centrally decreed planning regulations to house Muslim refugees from Crete, the Caucasus, and elsewhere.

The remodeling of the suqs in the period is most famously associated with Midhat Pasha and his brief, hyperactive period as governor. But Weber argues that the renovation and expansion of the suqs was far more thoroughgoing and extensive than Midhat Pasha’s undertaking alone, and far more driven by local interests and needs. Some of these redevelopments were on a grand scale: the Hamidiyya Suq, for example, is longer than any of the European arcades of the period that it resembled. It incorporated new building techniques imported from Europe, such as steel girders for the upper storeys, and followed Ottoman planning regulations, even though the project was initiated by the local council. (Others were initiated by local figures like the Mardam Bek brothers, who stood to benefit as both landlords and merchants—and, because of their positions within the reformed administration, could get things done.) Damascene needs shaped the way the suq functioned, too. In a part of the suq aimed at elite locals and wealthy tourists, shopping became a leisure activity well before 1914, with goods highly visible behind large glass shop-windows or in glass-fronted display cabinets; in some shops, at least, haggling disappeared. Such architectural

manifestations of social distinction—in Bourdieu’s sense—are a frequent topic in the book.

For Weber, though, it is not public buildings or suqs but houses that are “the real treasure of Damascene architecture,” and they are at the heart of his affections as well as his research interests (227). As “the most personal units in the built environment,” they bear witness to cultural change at the most intimate level—and across all strata of society (227). Surviving houses, modest as well as grand, “provide a powerful body of evidence: they are more representative than the documentary evidence left behind by just a small section of the population, namely the intellectual elite” (460). Houses in this period became subject to building regulations, and their parallel orientations increasingly were determined by municipal planning, but their size, structure, and internal arrangements depended very much on the owner. As new modes of life developed, houses changed. For example, as bulky furniture became more widespread, at least among the upper classes, rooms that had once been multipurpose became more functionally distinct, and architectural form also changed, with, for instance, large wall niches—which had once served to store bedding during the day—shrinking. In this case, the origin of the change was the local adoption of European practices, but the domestic forms it gave rise to were distinctly Damascene.

Courtyards were also reconfigured, and later in the century a new form of house—what Weber calls a *konak*, built around a central hall—developed. This form emerged across the Ottoman provinces; in Damascus, though, it was combined with older local forms in the “*konak-and-courtyard*” house, which by the turn of the century was a standard form for newly built houses both large and small. Increasingly, the traditionally inward-facing Damascene house also began to present a representational façade to the world. These symmetrical façades, like those on public buildings, were designed to reflect new principles of order, grafted successfully onto Damascene norms.

What Weber calls the “second Ottomanization of Damascus” touched not just public buildings, but private lives (422). Wall paintings and other iconography in Damascenes’ homes expressed a sense of Ottoman identity that was modern (the classic symbol was a steamship on the Bosphorus) and aware of the wider world. For example, in the luxurious house of Muhammad Hasan Agha al-Barudi, a prominent and wealthy man who made a successful Tanzimat career serving on both the city and district

councils, was an image of the Miramare Castle in Trieste, home of the Austrian archduke Maximilian, whose brief spell and sad end as emperor of Mexico was widely reported in the Ottoman press. Although the residences of the elite are often the best preserved, many other examples—idealized depictions of Istanbul, or the Ottoman star and crescent—are to be found in far more modest homes. This evidence shows that “the new identity as an Ottoman citizen was widely accepted among Damascenes,” and not only Muslim Damascenes (460). Weber makes a powerful and strongly supported argument, not just about Damascene architecture, but also about politics and society in the late Ottoman Empire.

The book’s finely drawn analysis of the relationship between the city’s built heritage and its inhabitants might have been extended still further. In an article on Alexandria in the same period, On Barak has attempted to show how the physical transformations of the city—the hard surfaces of the newly paved streets, say—affected its politics and social life. Weber does not adopt this technopolitical approach, but he does hint that photographs themselves played a role in the transformation of the urban fabric that they documented: craftsmen seem to have worked from postcards to paint interiors, for example. The book offers future researchers plenty of evidence to develop this line of inquiry.

The book’s lavish illustrations—over 1,300, not counting local street plans—deserve particular admiration. Virtually every point Weber makes is supported by at least one and sometimes several pictorial examples, drawn from an array of sources among which Weber’s own photos, the private collection of Wolf-Dieter Lemke, and the public collection of the Library of Congress are only the most notable. Copious and detailed primary and secondary source references in the footnotes support the argument throughout and offer numerous avenues for further reading. The book is beautifully produced: the designer and indexer are rightly credited by name.

No book on this scale can escape a few quibbles. At times its polyglot origins poke through; for instance, the text in the numerous small-scale street plans that locate individual buildings is still in French. More seriously, it is hard to fit these plans and the buildings they localize together in one overall context, especially buildings outside the old city and Marja Square. A large map would have helped. If it seems impertinent to demand more illustrations in a book that already has hundreds of them, meanwhile, the

absence of a list of illustrations is a bigger problem. In volume two all the illustrations are grouped with the relevant building, but the 900-plus figures in volume one are more scattered, and have to be located via the index at the end of volume two.

These points, though, are minor criticisms that derive from the book's sheer size—which itself raises a couple of questions about how it will be used. At two mammoth volumes, the book is hardly portable, and the price tag of 245 US dollars may be prohibitive. All this means that the book is primarily a reference work. It deserves a place in any library with collections on architecture, urbanism, or Middle Eastern history, and offers riches to justify any researcher's time. But a condensed version in the format of a single-volume monograph would make the book more accessible to graduate students, and more usable for teachers of undergraduates—though it would lose the “treasure chest” feel of this edition.

As it is, though, this book is a magnificent monument to the built heritage of Damascus and the lives of countless Damascenes. Photos of crumbling walls and decaying interiors, and many a comment in the text (especially in the catalog), make clear that that heritage was under threat when the research was carried out, between the late 1990s and late 2000s. It is under much greater threat now.