The Production of Valuable Space: Gentrification of the Old City of Damascus as a Field of Social Practices, Representations, and Relations[1]

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the politics of recovery and revitalization of "the Old City" of Damascus, as part of spatial practices and discourses of the inhabitants.

In Damascus, as with many global cities, exposure to the world-system is leading to a process of gentrification. The old city is being restored and transformed into a suitable area for dwelling and leisure that caters to the middle and upper classes who seek a "traditional atmosphere". Different social actors are involved in a variety of transformations. These include: the protection of monuments, restoration of buildings, openings of restaurants, internet cafés, hotels, cultural and artistic centres, transformation of boroughs in locations for movies.

In many cases the social actors involved in such transformations must confront the pre-gentrification inhabitants as they reinterpret space in different ways

As the architects and engineers of the Mudīrīe al-Medīne al-Qadīme stress, Old Damascus' peculiar feature is to be a living area. Thus they stress the importance of traditional use of living space and work to avoid a clash between gentrification and the habits of dwellers.

The paper discusses 1) the production of different ways of spatial representation and discourses about the space, carried out by different social actors living in the same district; 2) the malleability of the concept of traditions of built environment; 3) the encounter in a restoring site of different social worlds, to show that the lives of the social actors, even if local in their expressions, are important to understand the global processes, that are taking place across the Middle East, that objectify such ideas as history, historicity, tradition, typicalness, locality..

Introduction

The Relationship between culture and its use of space has long been regarded as an important topic for Middle East studies[2]. My research concerns those spatial practices and discourses about the space through which the ancient city of Damascus is gradually being shaped.

One of the processes set going by a series of practices and discourses concerning the space is gentrification. Such term suggests the conversion of socially marginal areas of urban cores into middle classes residential areas[3], reflecting increasing investment in the inner districts of major cities. This movement began in Western Europe and North America in the 1960s and is linked to the strong expansion of service industry. As the management of capital flows was no longer regulated by traditional legal and commercial systems of control, the requirement grew to concentrate in the urban cores the centres, or knots, of such network of flows.

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[1] Grateful thanks to Fadi Andari for editing this paper.

[2] Cfr. Eickelman 2002, Rabinow 1989, Abu-Lughod 1965, 1978 e 1987, Brown 1971, Denis 1996, Rafeq 1989, Bacharach 1989, Miura 1989, Lapidus 1969 e 1973, Saqqaf 1987, Nasr 1978, Pandolfo 1997, Brown 1973, Koji & Talai 1989, Salamandra 2004.

[3] Sassen 1990, 1997 e 2002, Zukin 1987, Low 1986 e 1996, Lawrence & Low 1990, Smith 1982, 1987 e 1992, Clark 1988 e 1992, Hamnett 1991 e 1992, Schaffer & Smith 1986.

Remarkable capital investments were exploited in damaged residential areas close to downtown districts; the rehabilitation of such areas were financed chiefly by private middle class citizens who planned to settle for habitation and support services. Through this, inner cities saw the growth of service firms as well as cultural and commercial amenities.
The affluence of new inhabitants contrasted with those of existing inhabitants such that the incomers were perceived to constitute a new urban gentry. Their dwelling choices, their lifestyle and their educational and occupational level funnelled into a particular *habitus* that distinguished them from the rest of the population of the same areas.
The phenomenon of gentrification started in Damascus in the 1990s.[4] Of course concern for the Old City is pervasive, and dates back at least to 1979, when UNESCO put the Old City of Damascus in the World Heritage list.[5] Nevertheless, until 15 years ago, concerns by Syrian national authorities involved only the protection of the main monuments and tourist paths. On-going economic liberalization[6] has allowed many investors to enter into the real estate market. The rehabilitation of old houses did not require large capital investment, so it attracted many people from the middle-classes, who bought cheap buildings and used them for work, habitation or as an investment. At the same time, former owners of the big Arab houses made a 'comeback' to the Old City and to their houses, where they opened cafés, restaurants and hotels. Many of these are members of the rich and powerful politicians' and traders' families that built such luxurious houses in order to dwell in them until the end of the nineteenth century.[7] Since the first decades of the twentieth century they left their houses because of the deterioration and the overspill of the Old City, and moved to other areas, chiefly in the suburbs.
Nowadays gentrification of Damascus is in an advanced stage. I place in the class of "*gentrifiers*" (Smith 1992) private citizens who buy, sell and lend buildings, national firms, employees working at the safeguard of historical and architectonical wealth, civil society associations- making people aware of the question of recovery of building and dwelling traditions, private citizens who use certain areas of the Old City for their activities, the *gentrifiers*-residents. The latter form a homogeneous group for working level, educational level, needs and wishes, and for *habitus*. In this paper I focus on some of their practices, trying to understand how their practices and discourses concerning the space compare with those of pre-gentrification dwellers.
The site of my research is the Old City of Damascus, almost totally enclosed in the walls built under Nur al-Din's rule in XII century.[8] It's a topographically quite even site, and it carries its own name in daily language and in administrative classifications: al-Medīna al-Qadīme, that distinguishes it from other ancient (*qadīm*) quarters. That is why I consider it possible to isolate the *medīna al-qadīme* and to consider it as a separate site from the rest of the town. After such a localization I researched other districts within the metropolis or other towns outside the municipality of Damascus, focusing on their interconnections and overlaps with the Old City. Thus, mapping borders out among places, or rather finding frontier zones among them and the Old City, I could compare the former with the latter.

Literature

According to Saskia Sassen, gentrification is a move back to the city caused by the demands for a certain style of life, created by middle and middle-high income workers in the advanced

[4] Wilson 2004, Salamandra 2004.
[5] Chastel, Millon, Taralon 1979.
[6] al-Hamwy 1992, Wedeen 1999, Kienle 1994, Heydemann 1999, Gorge 2003, Hinnebusch 2001.
[7] Weber n.r.,1998 e 1999, Pellitteri 2004.
[8] Hitty 1951, Bacharach 1989.

sectors of the service industry.[9] Sassen links this phenomenon directly with capitalistic economic reforms which since the 1960s in North America and Western Europe, enabled the main yielding trades to converge in urban centres downtown to the detriment of the outskirts. The author focuses on delocalization brought about by gentrification and the plight of people forced to leave their homes because of raising prices. She does not explain why prices and rents rise.

Neil Smith affirms that rehabilitation of certain urban areas and devaluation of others is a mirror on the unevenness of global capitalistic development.[10] He asserts that gentrification is part of a trend of raising capital investment in high density environments; this involved the conversion of condominiums, construction of offices, renewal and construction of hotels, restaurants and malls. Gentrification both followed this phenomena and maintained its pace.

Smith[11] and Clark[12] explain why chosen areas for rehabilitation are located in inner cities. They draw on rent gap theory, that is the difference between actual and potential land value. An estate value is equal to the building value plus the actual land value. The latter isn't often equivalent to potential land value: this happens only when the best conditions of land use are reached. In this case there is no rent gap. Building depreciation involves falling actual land value: in this case the rent gap rises such that the building owner no longer invests capital in its maintenance (it isn't worthwhile), making little profit from it. Building deterioration gets worse. As rent gap rises, investors' interests in estate rehabilitation increase; land rehabilitation entails the clearing of the rent gap. If potential land value of a certain area is determined by its attraction for people with strong purchasing power, then the result is gentrification.

All these explanations stress the importance of supply in leading to gentrification. Chris Hamnett[13] on the other hand focuses on demand and on the individual choices of *gentrifiers*.

Sharon Zukin[14] focuses on *gentrifiers*' lifestyle and social reproduction. They are middle class, chiefly employees in the service industry or the civil service; many of them are intellectuals, artists and part-time workers. *Gentrifiers* choose a lifestyle that provides them with visibility and status; such a lifestyle is only made possible by an economic model that concentrates the main trades in the urban core and provides a sufficient amount of buildings. In exchange *gentrifiers* contribute to the expansion of such a model: once they enter the rehabilitation market (which doesn't require large amounts of start-up capital), they become virtual specialists at rehabilitation. They work to increase value, to drive up competition for such areas and to expand the real estate market. The diffusion of their lifestyle raises investments in cultural market and in the production of preservationist goods and services.

The concentration in the city of Damascus of important branches of the service sector and of the state bureaucratic apparatus; the gradual economic liberalization and the recent significant events related to it– such as the growth of private banks and credit institutions-; the development of the tourist, communication and construction industries are some of the factors that make possible major works of renovation of the built environment in the central districts of the Syrian capital. In accordance with some of the old city features– centrality, historic significance, topographic and imaginative evidence– such a district is among the areas that are most concerned with gentrification.

Gentrification of the Old City of Damascus

[9] Sassen 1990, 1997, 2002.
[10] Smith 1982.
[11] Smith 1987.
[12] Clark 1988.
[13] Hamnett 1992.
[14] Zukin 1987.

The economic conditions of gentrification of Damascus are determined by a brisk demand/supply dynamic. The latter is made possible by the large availability of empty buildings and by the "movement back" (*raj'*) to the old city.
The large availability of empty buildings in the Old City is based on three factors: 1) the decline of the extended family as living unit; 2) demographic movements (such as the exodus of Syrian Jews in the decades following the creation of Israel; this exodus made a ghost district of the Jewish Quarter); 3) urban movements, such as wealthy families movement away from the inner city towards higher status areas.
The "movement back" to the Old City, *i.e.* the flow of capital investments into this area, is determined by six events and dynamics that illustrate the economic rationality of *gentrifiers*. 1) At the end of the 1980s houses were cheap; people started investing into property in an area where actual land value was increasing because 2) the government fostered investments in tourist and cultural sectors (monument restoration, opening of restaurants and cafés in the Old City); 3) UNESCO added the old districts of Damascus to the World Heritage list; 4) so actual land value increased further. More recently investments in property boomed as banks halved interest rates from 8% to 4% and many creditors saw real estate as a good investment; 5) some people invest in real estate to live close to their workplace, in a prestigious area cheaper then other residential suburbs. Even rents aren't as expensive as in such suburbs; 6) resident-gentrifiers choose a lifestyle that provides them with status and self-representation: they are an affluent group in terms of social class (middle and upper middle classes), employment and educational levels (intellectuals, artists, civil servants, small businessmen) as well as in needs and wishes, *habitus*.[15] They feel satisfied living away from other chaotic districts, they feel united in the cause of rehabilitating decayed areas of the city; they gain economic benefits (resource and labour sharing; if they are in business, customer sharing) and political benefit (common cause to petition for services and infrastructures).

Geographical individuation of al-Medīna al-Qadīme is not as important in my research as its practical, enunciative and representational localization. Indeed a place consists of what social actors do, say and represent. Thus in my survey on the Old City my stay in and encounter with people who build, govern, restore, dwell, pass through, represent, lived involved:
1) Observing/being engaged in social actors' practices and relations.
2) Interweaving a conversation with the actors of such practices.
3) Interpreting the meaning of representations of the place, often with social actors' help and through concepts close to their experience.
I pursued a cultural analysis of the ways different social actors create space and are created by space; different kinds of practice and discourse take place and overlap in a complex space such as the Medīna al-Qadīme of Damascus. Gentrification in particular entails approach, mutual influence and sometimes clash between different *habitus* concerning the way one sees the neighbourhood, the ways and times one uses rooms and domestic spaces, and the representations of space.

Representing the space

David Harvey[16] stresses the importance of cartographical representations as "power tools", through which certain parties can impose their view of space organization and place populations into homogeneous and absolute spatial frames of reference. The improvement of cartographical tools in the 15th century allowed maps to represent reality in order to organize

[15] According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2003), people's practices, acts, thoughts, perceptions, expressions and utterances are regulated improvisations produced by *habitus*; its limits are assigned by material, historic and social conditions in which it was produced. Practices generated by *habitus* reproduce such objective conditions.
[16] Harvey 1993.

spatial phenomena within the aims of objectivity and theoretical abstraction,. Places such as the boundaries estates, borderlines, road networks, and the like, acquire through cartographical tools the elements of objectivity and rationality and impose themselves as true and universally acknowledged. Any trace of the author's individual perception, whether led by personal sensory experience, mythological heritage, or by religious ideas of his group, is blotted out from map.

Michel de Certeau[17] examines the history of such change; he emphasizes the improvement in cartographic methods that drove "map" type representations to supersede "itinerary" type. Whereas the former implies and rouses the act of "seeing", the latter shows and involves the act of "doing": the former suggests space organization, the latter a movement through the space. Besides being a visual representation, "map" type is an enunciative act constructed around such expressions as "here there is" and "there stands". On the other hand "itinerary" types are enunciative acts, paths made of directions such as "this way you go to", "this door takes you into". Lastly, whereas any trace of practice is blotted out by the "map", the *savoir faire* that made "itinerary" is clear in it.

Although maps became important "totalizing tools" used by political and economic powers for the aims mentioned above, other tools such as itinerary were not totally superseded. In spatial representations New Yorkers[18] carry out and enunciate the two types on a daily basis; "doing" and "passing through" are unceasingly embedded in people's accounts and representations.

Stefanio Pandolfo[19] states that the introduction in French North African and Middle Eastern colonies of cartographic systems elaborated since the Enlightenment in Europe entailed an important change in the spatial perceptions and representations of social actors who produced maps and plans. The "gift" of tools such as perspective and "bird's eye" views set in motion changing dynamics in the ways space was imagined and drawn.

My survey with social actors involved in cartographic representations of Damascus *medīna al-qadīme* allowed me to observe some dynamics of encounter, clash, mutual influence and overlap among different types of graphical representation of the space, made by individuals of different social groups. Drawings of space, often the same space, changes depending on whether the author is a carpenter, an architect, a sculptor, a hiker, a businessman, a televiewer. In every type one can find influences of every other type.

Even the way space is enunciated changes with the individual who is talking, showing, explaining, describing, and depends on the different moments of the same individual's life. The way a regional estate representative talks about his daily paths differs from the way he talks of how his institution manages an estate. Similarly, a hiker of the streets and venues of the old town speaks differently of a place he likes to stay in from a venue he works in. Lastly, the representation of the space shown on television, whether it aims to depict its objective qualities or to recall its mythical qualities, wields an influence on the way different social actors live and interpret their space.

Urban design

Inspecting a map, the Syrian capital is faintly reminiscent of a hand with open fingers [Fig. 1]. The urban plan devised by Michel Ecochard in 1936 was nicknamed "open fingers". During the French mandate Ecochard went to Syria to study urban planning. Until the mandate era, Damascus spread out over three axes: the first was formed by districts at the foot and at the mountainside of Qasīūn, a rocky hill towering above the city; the second, embracing the old city, formed by the districts standing along the main thoroughfares which link the Medīna al-

[17] De Certeau 2001.
[18] De Certeau 2001.
[19] Pandolfo 1997.

Qadīme to Qasīūn; the third, made up of the districts standing along the "street of pilgrimage", from the old city southwards, toward the Jordan desert and Saudi Arabia. Urban expansion forecast by Ecochard would have been developing along five axes linking radially the city with already existing outskirts, like five fingers; in the areas embraced between such fingers, the Ġuṭa oasis would have been preserved as the main source of cultivable ground of the Damascus region.[20]
An open hand shaped plan was intended to contrast the narrowness of the old city as a district wrapped up in itself. Wide avenues would link the new zones of urban development; along those would have risen residential and working districts of French mandataries and other foreigners.
Concerning the Old City, the general plan was to widen streets and to knock down deteriorated buildings. Fortunately, in Architect Beshr al-Berry's opinion, such processes were limited to few areas. Their repercussions are in full view along some of the main thoroughfares of the Old City. According to Ecochard's and his mentor Danji's modernist ideas, the response to universal human needs and questions would have been a universalist practical and theoretical framework, "ignoring society, geography, culture, climate, building materials variables"[21] and local practices.

Fig. 1

As the following urban plan, devised for Casablanca by Ecochard which went astray following the unforeseen enlargement of Moroccan capital,[22] the Damascus plan was a failure. In the following decades the Syrian capital expanded enormously, drawing people

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[20] Bianquis 1981, Naito 1986, Rafeq 1989.
[21] Rabinow 1989.
[22] Rabinow 1989.

from the countryside and villages; the latter experienced depopulation and because of city expansion beyond axes borders Ġūṭa was subjected to erosion and desertification as fields and farm methods to hinder the advance of infertile soil were abandoned.

Graphical representation of the house

The practice of graphical representation of space is common among those who are employed in the rehabilitation of the Old City. The way a mason team leader draws and enunciates the space of a house differs from the way an architect in charge of the plan does. I observed the encounter/clash between such differences on the occasion of my extended visit to Jacques Montlucon at the restoration site of his ancient Arab house in Qemarie district, at the center of al-Medīna al-Qadīme. The semi-professional restorer's team leader is Mohammed Nimr Mustafà.

Mohammed's knowledge of the social and relational dimensions of the house stems from information heard listening to enthusiastic site conversations among architects and *gentrifier*-residents. He gave me his drawing [Fig.2] of the Treasury Minister's house, close to Montlucon - and expressly drew it for my research. It contains his perceptions of domestic space and represents his ownership over working tools and places.

Mohammed says he's not able to interpret the architect's plans: the only plans he can read are the building materials of a house; as soon as he enters a house to restore, on the face of it he sees what has to be done.

In their turn, architects are not able to read Mohammed's map. Inspecting it, the architect al-Berry smiled and described the map as pretty but meaningless. Whilst acknowledging the skill behind Mohammed's drawings, he could not understand it and it failed to tell him anything: "It is plan and perspective mingled together!". He noticed that buildings and even the relative orientation of rooms were reversed. "Perhaps he doesn't know compass points!" he joked. He found it absurd that Mohammed wrote the technical names of materials such as "pillow" and "column". Indeed 'map' is the summary of Mohammed's savoir-faire: one can find within it the information needed for building and restoring an ancient house. However the architect al-Berry described the map as a "figment of his [Mohammed's] imagination about the house". "He 'sees' a wall, a *iūān*, a window, and he draws them. It's what he 'sees' in general".

Indeed Mohammed's map doesn't depict a particular house; on my first visit to the Treasury Minister's house he asked me several times whether I wanted a drawing of that particular house or of an Arab house *bišakel ʿām*, "in general". I answered I wanted a representation of that particular one. It would appear that al-Berry is correct in stating that the map represents a figment of his imagination about Arab house.

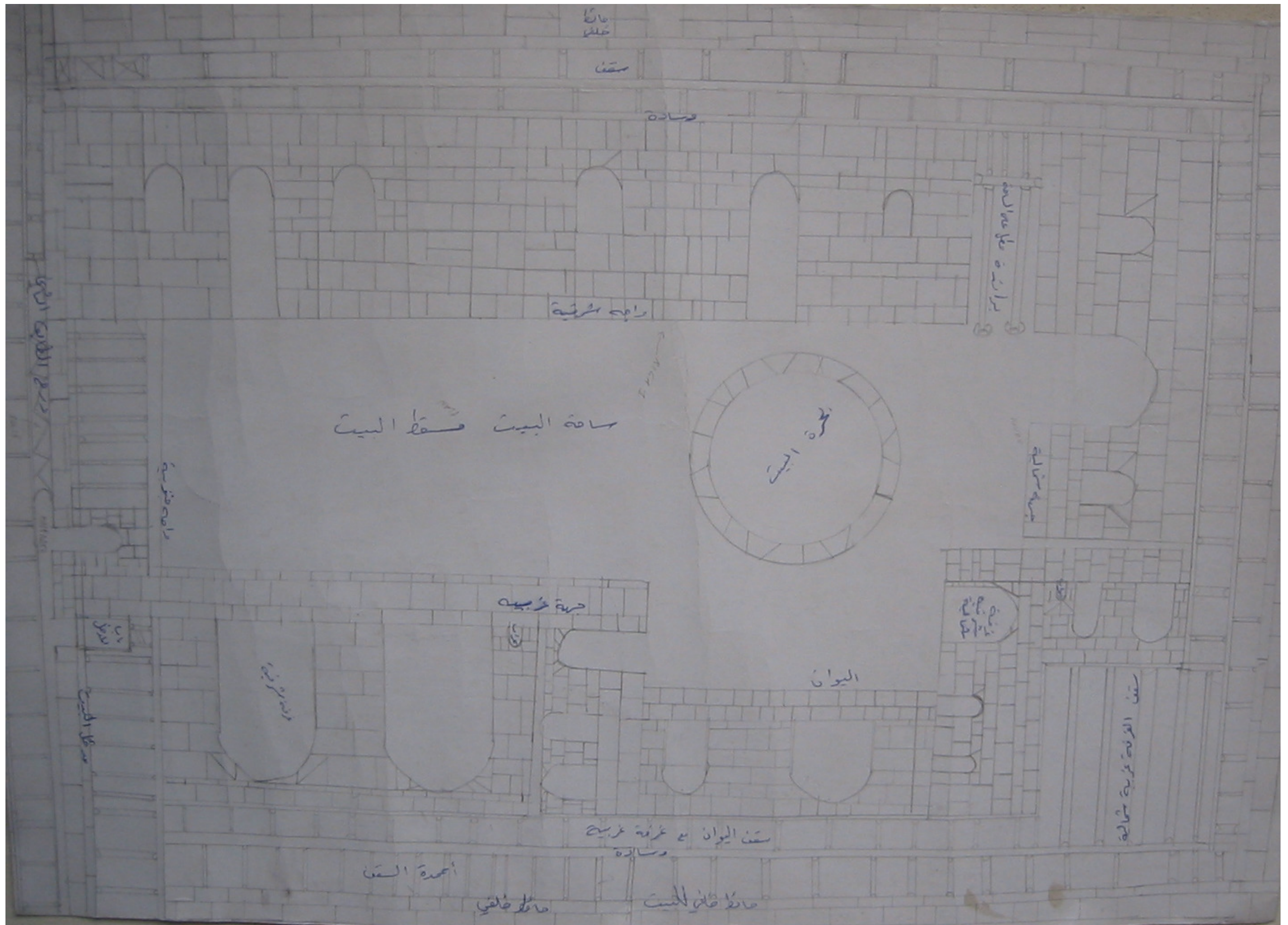

Fig. 2

The map is a pencil drawing on a 35 cm high and 50 cm long cardboard, with blue ink inscriptions. It is drawn in plan and perspective at the same time. Mohammed explained to me that it should be read as a flattened three-dimensional scale model, folding it along certain segments: the line where the courtyard ends and the wall begins, the line where the first floor ends and the roof begins. He led me on the coded path of his map; he lowered his head when we got in through the low front door to show respect for landlord; he bowed to *marhab*, the niche that shows the direction of Mecca; then he measured the thickness of the walls and he showed me pillows and columns inside it.

Kevin Lynch[23] wrote *The image of the city* seeking to expose urban design experts to citizens' spatial needs and to the representations people produce according to such needs. Lynch noticed that the maps interviewees made were simplifications of the reality led by particular aims; maps were produced through reduction, elimination and addition of elements, through blend and deformation, through arrangement and organization of the parts. Notwithstanding Lynch's awareness of the different ways people conceive space according to share cultural values, he makes clear that the best graphical representation of reality is a scale map with a coherent degree of abstraction. Interviewees' maps appeared to him strange, knocked together, distorted and illogical; they looked like plans drawn on infinitely flexible rubber sheets.

[23] Lynch 1960.

As Stefania Pandolfo depicts a Moroccan draftsman's map of his village, she compares graphic representation to *riḥla* of Maġrebi literary tradition, that is journey as displacement, a movement through unfamiliar lands and people. She stresses that as the one who watches the drawing is forced to move, he performs himself a *riḥla* around and through the map. The one who observes is not so much a watcher as a walker. The reason lies in both the features of the drawing, made by mixing different dimensions and observation points– so that the one who watches it is supposed to shift around its sides, and in its content, because an account goes on through the sequence of images. In Pandolfo's opinion the key to such an account has to be found in the historical and ethnographical context in which the drawing was made.
The context in which Mohammed made his map is that of Damascus gentrified Medīna al-Qadīme.

Restoration

Gentrifiers-residents' spatial practices differ sharply from those of pre-existing inhabitants of the Old City. One can draw the first distinction in the different ways people perceive the quarter. Drawing on Ratzel's work, Marcel Mauss[24] terms "mental volume" as the space one can take with the mind. *Gentrifiers*-residents' mental volume takes in a wider space than other inhabitants. In stating that *gentrifiers*-residents are not interested in tying bonds in the neighbourhood,[25] more precise information is needed: they aren't attracted by the practice of neighbourhood as it is led by pre-gentrification inhabitants, that is the neighbourhood as the main system of imposition and inhibition of behaviour and choices of life.[26] This does not mean that Damascene *gentrifiers*-residents don't carry out spatial practices that take in their district. Firstly, they form a homogeneous group in terms of needs and wishes, and for *habitus*. They are middle and upper-middle class (intellectuals, artists, employees in service industry or civil service, small businessmen) and their educational level is high. They think of the whole Medīna al-Qadīme as their neighbourhood. As a general rule *gentrifiers*-residents know each other, they haunt the same gentrified venues, they run through physical and verbal itineraries that link them in a network unwinding through the whole oval of the Old City; on the other hand, mental volume taken in by pre-gentrification inhabitants is more constricted.
As often happens, their respective activities and practices (such as purchase of a house and restorations) are conversation pieces for them. Even the content of disputes between neighbours are different from those that shape pre-gentrification neighbourhood practices, as the following case, which Architect al-Berry told me, highlights. Jacques Montlucon, a French architect employee at UNESCO, bought a home in the Old City at the beginning of 2004; his neighbours are the Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and his wife. They restored the house for their trips to Damascus, much reduced following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafeq al-Hariri and the straining of Syria-Lebanese relations. Interest in ancient districts for residential use shown by international organizations employees and important politicians- individuals who are used to displaced lifestyles- is a significant aspect of global cities.[27] Lady Jumblatt spends several days on the roof deck she has constructed at the top of her house, admiring the panorama of Medīna al-Qadīme. On one occasion Jacques Montlucon made workers put on his roof a tin tank for water. Lady Jumblatt, piqued by the visual obstacle, asked Montlucon's workers - unsuccessfully - to remove it, then on a party at the Embassy turned to the French ambassador to smooth things over; the latter asked Jacques to dislodge the tank. Once Montlucon had done so, the lady complained about the metal

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[24] Duekheim, Mauss 1976.
[25] Clark 1988, Zukin 1987, Hamnett 1992.
[26] Toru 1989, Abu-Lughod 1965 and 1987, Lapidus 1969 and 1973.
[27] Sassen 2002.

handrails Jacques had recently placed on the roof, because they obstructed her view (*manẓar*) as well.
Besides showing that arguments among *gentrifiers*-residents can be settled through the mediation of high officials, such incident reveals the behaviours and practices that distinguish *gentrifiers*-residents from other inhabitants. For pre-gentrification inhabitants the Old City is not a place that commands beautiful *manāẓer* (views): the Medīna al-Qadīme rises on the bank of Barada river and is one of the lowest areas of the city. Many pre-gentrification inhabitants come from other regions and have been in Damascus for one or two generations. Some of them hold tight bonds with their hometown. Those born in Damascus who have family from other towns make frequent visits to their relatives. Those who can afford to, purchase homes away from the city. Their hometowns in the country or mountain villages are their preferred places for *manāẓer*; 'Amāra Barranīe quarter, for example, is mostly inhabited by people coming from northern Rīf Dimašq- the *muḥāfaẓa* (administrative district) surrounding Damascus *muḥāfaẓa*: they spend their leisure time and admire panorama on the hills of the *rīf* (country). This indicates the endurance of the memory of traditional use of places. The same behaviour is seen in inhabitants of Bāb Tūma who are originally from Homs, and of people from southern Rīf Dimašq working in the capital. In addition, on spring and summer nights many Damascenes go to the most popular location in the city, that is Qassiūn mountain.
Of particular note is that Damascenes generally consider spending time on the roofs of houses obnoxious behaviour: some associate it with homosexuality (pigeon fanciers, who spend many hours on their roofs are regarded as homosexuals), others with obtrusiveness, others associate it with a bad reputation (*sam'ā bš'ā*). The stigma of this behaviour is connected with the general *habitus* that emphasises the protection of the private space from stranger's gazes, and creates a set of architectonic, behavioural, spatial and temporal arrangements for this purpose.[28] Staying on the roof creates the risk of an individual peering into a neighbour's courtyard. For this reason, when one has to go on to the roof– assuming an emergency for example– one must announce his intentions through public exclamations. Should such occasions increase in frequency, neighbours would have to raise barriers to obstruct the view of their private spaces.
Thus, whereas *gentrifiers*-residents regard roofs as a place of *manẓar* and relaxation, and to this end furnish and grace them with arbours and plants, pre-gentrification inhabitants often neglect them; roofs are off-limits. Thus one would say that the memory of the practices related to this space is obsolete among *gentrifiers*-residents. It is nevertheless true that a widespread practice among pre-gentrification inhabitants is to build new rooms on the roofs, although it is illegal and punishable; these rooms are often used as potting sheds. Dwellers store tools for roof maintenance: rollers, sacks of lime, sometimes cement (a building material forbidden in the Medīna al-Qadīme); indeed the roof has to be waterproofed periodically in order to avoid rain seepage damaging the frame of the house, which is made mostly of wood beams and mud hammers (*lebn*). As many architects from the Mudīrīe al-Medīna al-Qadīme stress, "the Old City is growing upwards". Both pre-gentrification inhabitants ant *gentrifiers*-residents contribute towards this evolution.

Restoration vis-à-vis evolution

The main contention about the spatial qualities in the Medina al-Qadīme of Damascus is about the use of building materials in the gentrification process. UNESCO added the Old City of Damascus to the World Heritage List after an inspection in 1978. UNESCO experts presented a report in which they stated the reasons of their choice.[29] The extraordinary artistic

[28] Abu-Lughod 1987.
[29] Chastel, Millon, Taralon 1979.

and aesthetical diversity of the old city, the rarity and significance of the types of structures and the presence of "historical associations". The authors of the report noted that Damascus had been inhabited continuously for several millennia: this was the conclusive point for the insertion of the "Old City" in the World Heritage list.
This acknowledgement led the Government to make two primary decisions that underscore subsequent developments in the Old City. The first was to fix the boundaries of the areas of great historical relevance. The second was to put a public corporation in charge of the protection of such areas. These decisions were based on the interpretation of the UNESCO mandate and have been the subject of controversy.
In the first place it was decided that the boundary of historical relevance was the part of the city enclosed by Nūr al-Dīn's walls; this part of the city was designated as the Medīna al-Qadīme par excellence. Whole quarters, such as al-Midān, Sūq Sārūja, 'Amāra Barrānīe, Ṣālḥīe, although dating back before the fall of the Ottoman Empire, were left out of the acknowledgement of historical value.[30] Nowadays many individuals and groups contest this decision and claim that other pre-mandatory districts should benefit from UNESCO acknowledgement. This is the argument made by the Friends of Damascus campaign for the protection of the site where the Four Seasons Hotel stands. A Damascene authoress, Siham Tergeman, stresses the historical value of the districts surrounding Sūq Sārūja and Baḥṣa, to which she dedicated her novel *Daughter of Damascus*.[31]
Secondly, with regard to the duty of public corporations in charge of protecting the Medīna al-Qadīme, the most notable of which is the Mudīrīe al-Medīna al-Qadīme – commonly known as Maktab 'Anbar. A contradiction arises from the friction between the UNESCO acknowledgment regarding the unceasing evolution of the city through five millennia, and the decision to conserve the present historical-architectural structure of the Old City. To put it another way, the safeguard model is at odds with the traditional practice of reconstruction, as unceasing evolution is ingrained in the social and architectural features of the environment. In the gentrification workers' jargon the verbs restore (*rammama*) and build (*'ammara*) are synonyms.
Two corollaries stem from these deliberations: the first is that construction works involving buildings structures are forbidden in the old city; the second is that the only allowed materials for the restorations are "traditional" materials (*maūād taqalīdīe*).
The main feature of the traditional Damascene house was the juxtaposition of different blocks and parts, each detached from each other, easy to separate and cut. In this way the environment could easily adapt to the changes made by the groups who inhabit it. For instance, variations in the number of households were accompanied by the addition or removal and conveyance of blocks. A household's decline in economic fortunes could be reversed by cutting and selling out parts of the home. In many *īūān* for instance, the southern side that overlooks the courtyard, could be bricked up and the northern side could be opened up onto the alley, so that *īūān* could be turned into a workshop or a store.
The built-up environment accommodated wider population movements as well: in the former Jewish quarter many houses were adapted, through cuttings and partitions, to accommodate the Palestinian refugee groups that came to Syria after 1948 and the evacuees from Jolan after 1967. Such readjustments were hampered by the first corollary.
The second corollary is the enforcement of a law, brought in by the French mandatory administration in the 1920s, which forbids cement in the building works in the ancient quarters. This law, widely ignored until the 1980s, is now a spectre haunting the Medīna al-Qadīme: police patrols and emissaries from Mudīrīe al-Medīna al-Qadīme keep watch on the

[30] It even happens that people restore the listed buildings using materials from the houses in ruins of other ancient districts.
[31] Tergeman 1994.

abidance of such law and threaten transgressors with heavy fines or conspicuous bribes. Local police patrols chiefly keep watch over pre-gentrification inhabitant's continuous maintenance works, whereas employees from Mudīrīe al-Medīna al-Qadīme supervise the dwelling and venues of the *gentrifiers*. The latter gain access to expensive traditional materials (*lebn*, *kels*, *teben*, *qeneb*, *ḫašb*) almost effortlessly; using such materials becomes an integral part of their adhesion to the model of the protection of building traditions. On the other hand, pre-*gentrification* inhabitants face difficulties in finding such materials (even if some of them find attractive the idea of living in a fully "traditional" environment, according to *gentrifiers*' image of tradition): many of them use cement and other forbidden materials for the ordinary maintenance of their homes.

The site of a house undergoing restoration is a space where a series of practices are carried out through which *gentrifiers* represent themselves. It is the place where different social worlds are encountered: that of *getrifiers*-residents, that of urban planners and that of professional and semi-professional restorers. I observed the encounter of these categories in the restoring site of Jacques Montlucon's house. The restoration was directed by Simone Ricca, an Italian architect who came to Syria some years ago; he contacted Mohammed Nimr Mustafà– through Beshr al-Berry of Mudirīe al-Medina al-Qadīme– for the material management of the work, that came along under al-Berry's supervision.
Jacques Montlucon, in his sixties, decided to spend his old age in Damascus. The house he bought is in Qemarie, the quarter of the Old City spreading out from Omayyadi Mosque– the main monument in Damascus, also called the Great Mosque– to Bāb Tūma. The roof of his new house commands a beautiful view of the roofs of the Old City and on the minarets of the Great Mosque. In Beshr al-Berry's opinion, the site of Jacque's house was originally a wing of the larger house now belonging to Jumblatt.
Simone Ricca, the contract architect of UNESCO, charged with directing the restoration, intended to "bring the house back" to its previous conditions, before the modernization carried out by the former owners about fifty years ago. At the same time, in Ricca's opinion a certain modernization was needed in order to make the house liveable.
The "stateroom" of an Arab house, where male guests are received, is the *qa'a*. This is in the north side of the house, higher then the ground floor and the courtyard, but lower than the first floor. In the largest houses it is accessible through a stairway. The *qa'a* is divided into a low part (*āṭaba*) and a forty centimetres raised part (*tazar*), separated by a stone arch. A fountain can be placed in the *āṭaba*; the latter represents the entrance to the high part: guests are received strictly in the *tazar*, on the sofas placed on its three sides. The floor of the *tazar* is covered with carpets and the walls are covered with decorated wood (*sarūāl* o *ḫaṭ 'arabi*). In some cases *tazar* are three, with the *āṭaba* in the middle.
The former owners of Montlucon's house painted the walls of the *qa'a* white with red stripes, an ersatz of the inner walls of grand Damascene houses 18th century . When I visited the site, Simone Ricca, dressing dusty working clothes, was scraping the coating in order to dig up the original surface. For the same purpose he decided to remove the tiles the former owners had installed on the steps of the staircase leading to the first floor. He stressed that other restorers, such as those who worked in many venues of the old city, aimed for creating– artificially– a "traditional" taste through additions that have nothing to do with Damascene building traditions. Many courtyards of the new venues, such as Beit Jabri – one of the most popular in the *medīna al-qadīme*, have marble flooring "that are completely beside the point".
In accordance with the criteria set by UNESCO- both Ricca and Montlucon work for such organization- to add ancient districts of Damascus in the World Heritage List, in this restoration site *gentrifiers* are trying to dig up historical association. Further, they abide by

such criteria when they look for rare details in this house: the quality of rarity, to be found in the architecture, is generally a share value at Montlucon's.
At the top of the west wall of *āṭaba* there are two small windows of *jansīn*, a mixture of chalk and coloured glass, which lets light shine through their stitch-work. Such windows are damaged, but Ricca decided not to remove them, because of their age, rarity and value (priced at thousands of dollars, according to Mohammed Nimr Mustafà); today only two craftsmen manufacture them in Syria.
On my trips to Damascus in June 2004 the landlord was not in town, but I was able to see the room where he stayed in during his journeys to Damascus. There was a mattress resting on the roof, a small closet fitted into a recess in the wall with a few clothes hanging in addition to a few books. This room was part of a mezzanine cutting the hall on the left of the *īūān*, the vault space which occupies the southern side of a Damascene house and overlooks the courtyard. The *iūān* is the favourite place for family life in summer, as its location, oriented towards the north, leaves it permanently in the shade. The roof of *iūān* is raised over the courtyard; flanking it are two symmetrical hallways whose doors are at the level of the courtyard, lower than the roof of the *iūān*. On the left of Jacques' *īūān* the door had been bricked up and the hall, along with the west side of the courtyard, now formed part of Jumblatts' house. According to the architect al-Berry, this was evidence that Jacques' house had in the past formed the servants' quarter of a larger building.
A small blue tiled bathroom constructed by the restorers is attached to Jacque's temporary bedroom; the latter will become the guestroom once the works are completed. On the first floor they have constructed two bathrooms and a kitchen as well.
It should be stressed that architectonic operations that alter the frames of the buildings are forbidden in the Old City; nevertheless it is not unusual for the supervisors of Mudirīe al-Medīna al-Qadīme to allow such operations, especially when they take part in the restoration personally. Their trick is to run plumbing and pipeworks through the walls without installing bathroom and kitchen fittings, hiding the works so that inspectors of Mudīrīe do not see them upon completion Once Mudīrīe approval has been obtained, it is a simple process of fitting the remaining features..
It is possible that the functions of the rooms may change totally, when a new owner sets up plumbing and gas pipes, as for a kitchen and a bathroom. Basements (*qabu*) are normally used as larders by pre-gentrification inhabitants, as they remain cool throughout the year; Jacque's basement is going to be the main kitchen instead. On June 2004 a plumber had installed marble sinks, and was trying to find a solution to avoid sewage seepages from the near drainage as *qabu* is under the street surface. The space on the west of the *qa'a* had originally been a *ḥammām*, but the former dwellers had stopped using it; here a small sauna will be attached to it.
Originality, rarity, historicity, inhabitability: such qualities or values are embedded in the space, and are mediated through the space and through the specific ways it is qualified and restored, and are expressed in the materials that compose the space. Those residents influenced by *gentrifiers'* styles of restoration, whilst acknowledging the higher qualities of traditional materials, use more common materials such as enamel, cement and iron. Many of them indeed, whilst owning a remarkable "symbolic capital"[32] concerning the qualities, characteristics, and needs of the houses, lack the capital of money and relations- essential for restorating their houses according to Maktab 'Anbar rules.
Old Michel Šatta, living in the ancient district of Bab Tuma, recently restored his *ġurfa al-ḍuīūf* (guest room). To reach it one crosses a neat courtyard, full of plants and birds. Šatta

[32] Bourdieu 1992.

often complains that after restoration the *ġurfa al-ḍuīūf* became colder, because a layer of *teben*, serving as thermal insulator, was removed and replaced with cement. As Šatta puts it,

> the ancient civilization was built out of earth (*ṭīn*) and wood (*ḫašb*): it had its roots (*jzūr*) in the earth. What's the difference between cement and earth (*trāb*)?[33] There's quite a difference! Earth (*trāb*) sends out heat (*daf'*) and what sends out heat is called nostalgia (*ḥanīn*) and love (*ḥob*). Cement sends out cold: it bars relation (*'alāqa*) with love and with emotion (*'aṭef*).

Thus building materials mediate relations and even convey emotions such as nostalgia and love. Nostalgia can be expressed as deprivation of an environment and certain domestic materials which one misses: according to many pre-gentrification residents, *lebn, teben, keneb, kels* are expensive materials and the experts of such materials are few and greedy. *Nostalgia* can results in *utopia*[34] and have an effect on the built environment provided that one gains access to such resources. Otherwise, nostalgia stands at the same level of the "scars in the mental image" and of the "spectres of what previously existed".[35] According to Lynch, physical changes entail practical and emotional exertion, as the observer has to adapt his image to such changes. Šatta claims that in some districts

> the architectural fabric (*taḫrīb lilnisīj al-'amarāni*) was destroyed: when a new building system (*niẓām albinā' alḥadiṯ*) arises in the old houses, it destroys a piece of the civilization (*jza' min al-ḥaḍāra*) that was placed in the old houses.

If a *gentrifier*-resident owns the specific monetary capital needed for the orthodox restoration, his nostalgia can result in utopia:

> I decided to come back because I love the old city: I was born and grew up here; my family used to live here since a long time. In the past life was simple (*basīṭa*), with small reason for worrying, one didn't need much money, people were happier. Now there is much money, but people spend much and don't enjoy life (*ma bintmat' bil-ḥaīāt*). In the past one was sure that his family would help him if need be, but now everyone must fend for himself and face up to his responsibility. In the past there was no progress (*ḥaḍāra*); nowadays despite the progress people are not happy, they want more and more. [36]

Specific capital of knowledge

Knowledge of restoration methods is an economic resource, a "specific capital" in Bourdieu's terms.[37] *Mo'allimūn* (masters) who own such capital can bring pressure on investors and on *gentrifiers*-residents; they closely- almost obsessively- guard such knowledge, as the following occurrence shows.

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[33] Many Damascenes with a partial knowledge of the techniques of restoration refer in general to traditional building materials with the terms *trāb* (earth or ash) or *ṭīn* (earth or mud). Facing a wall which features a crack on its surface, through which one can see the different layers out of whom it is made, what anon-skilled eye sees is just earth and mud. Yet it is not an intentional undervaluation of these materials; on the contrary, the value of earth and wood is highly appraised, as shown by the circulation of the saying "Take the earth, it becomes gold" (*tkmaš al-trāb īaqlab ḍahab*) and by the custom of considering wood a lucky material; as the saying goes "beat the wood" (*duqᶜalā al-ḫašb*) to drive envy and bad luck away. However, I stress that a damascene house isn't built out of just earth and wood. I enjoyed a privilege, which is not granted to all Damascenes, to observe *mo'allimūn*'s work in the restoration sites and to be introduced to a "specific capital" of techniques often ignored by the residents themselves. The very orientalist stereotype of the ancient Arab house made of "mud and wood" (Keenan 2000) doesn't reckon with the affluence of such capital.

[34] Herzfeld 1991, Luz 2006 n.p.

[35] Lynch 1964.

[36] Informant: Abu Mohammed, who recently bought the house his grandparents sold at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the ancient district of al-'Iṣlāḥ.

[37] Bourdieu 1992.

Mohammed Nimr Mustafà Abu Šihab, the foreman of Montlucon's restoring site, is an expert at restorating ancient houses with traditional building materials. He works closely with Bilāl 'Abd al-Rasāl 'Abu Bilāl, with whom he restored several houses since 1992. Together they both took on many jobs that Na'im Zabīta assigned to them. Zabīta is one of the most renowned Damascene architects involved in the restoration of ancient houses. Mohammed and Bilāl say they are "one", "one plus one is one"; they cope with finding materials and arranging the other workers' days. They need few signals to understand each other. "When I'm on the ceiling on the top of the scaffolding and he's right at the bottom, we gaze into each other's eyes and we already know what to do". Both of them, like the rest of the workers, come from Jolān, the region of Syria occupied by Israel since 1967. All of them live in the district of Berzeh and they have known each other for a long time.
Mohammed attended school until he was eleven, then went into odd jobs that strengthened him and at thirteen started working as a mason. When he was twenty-two he was heading a team of workers. Shortly after he went to Libya, where the people he worked with thought he was from the same country, because of his features– dark-skinned, bushy black curly- haired. In Syria instead many believe he is Algerian or Tunisian.
He was groomed for the restoration of ancient houses by Daud 'Abu Šar, a Christian from Ma'lūla, in 1991. At the time 'Abu Šar was restoring a convent in Damascus. He told Mohammed "I'm not a master: somebody that knows more than me could come and teach me"; so whenever he sees a restoring site, he always takes the opportunity to give it a look-over, "because there is always something to learn".
At Montlucon's home Mohammed showed me a restored wall in the hall to the right of the *īūān*, and asked me proudly: "Have you ever seen a wall like this?". This rhetorical question, which anticipated a negative reply, implied the knowledge of the secret kept by that wall. Such secret lied in the mixture used to build it, called *ḫabūr*, consisting in a mix of water, sand, lime, dried tar and ash. He told me that nobody could make a *ḫabūr* like he does. His sand, indeed, is mined 450 meters underground; it is lacking in salt and for this reason it doesn't melt like normal sand. Normal sand is itchy to sleep on, whereas Mohammed's sand is not. He does not reveal the secrets of his sand to workmates that he would not trust with his life. To keep the secret, he claims it is normal sand. The secret of this sand was discovered through a trick: he and Bilāl went into the restoring site of a house. The master mason, who thought they were foreigners – Algerians or Moroccans – invited them to take a seat and to have some tea. They remained silent watching the master mason preparing his *ḫabūr* and talking about the characteristics of the sand with his aides, thinking Mohammed and Bilāl didn't understand his language (as Syrian and Maġrebi dialects are mutually incomprehensible). Mohammed sat observing, smoking and drinking his tea, and trying to commit the procedure to memory. At one point he stood up and greeted in perfect Syrian Arabic. The master mason, astonished, asked him about his origins and his occupation: Mohammed revealed that he was a Syrian mason and slipped away. "God gave us slyness, we have to use it!". This episode highlights the absence of consistency in the communication of knowledge in the field of restoration of ancient houses; Syrian Universities don't give restoration courses, and learning in this sector is merely experiential. Nevertheless it is actually Mohammed's experience that makes him a point of reference for the architects who direct the restorations.
In the middle of the piles of rubble of the treasury minister's house, close to Jacque's home and to Saīda Roqaīa Shia mosque, Mohammed showed me how he would build an Arab house. He was moving at ease through the piles of materials and derelict rooms. Sometimes he sat on the stones to chat with me, while I was jotting notes and taking pictures. I felt that he cared a lot for my research: he often told me that "You should know everything". The house he was working on would be turned into a luxury hotel; Mohammed was head of the masons

who were restoring it. At the time of my visit the house was in ruins; the courtyard was crammed with scraps, ceilings were crumbling, walls were scraped and I could see through to their frames.

The entrance to a Muslim Damascene house (*beīt šāmi*)[38] is through a low front door which leads onto the street (*ṭarīq*) or alley (*daẖle*). Once you cross it, a narrow corridor with at least one right-angled turning leads on to the courtyard (*sāḥ□a* o *'arḍ al-ḍīār*), a quadrangle in the open, whose median is the fountain (*baḥra*). The house comprises four blocks leading on to the internal courtyard. As these blocks are not connected, the courtyard becomes the centre of the house, which links and divides the huddle of parts. The south part comprises the *īūān* and the two rooms on its sides. The north part comprises the *qa'a*, raised over the courtyard and, on the same level of the courtyard, one or more rooms. In the east and west blocks there are the bedrooms, the kitchen, the cellars and the stairways to the first floor, with further bedrooms. The boundaries of the estate, the juxtaposition of the rooms within such boundaries, and the overall shape of the house depend on the structure of the ground floor (*ṭābeq 'arḍ*); the arrangement of the first floor, that usually expands on one or two sides (mostly east and west), enables the development of additional surfaces such as further rooms and patios.

Thus the spatial frame of the house is marked by this association of blocks around a courtyard. This is an extremely flexible pattern, which can be easily adapted to changes: partitions, additions and removals of parts following transfers of property, inheritances and clearances for street widening.

In larger and wealthier houses such a pattern can be multiplied two or three times so that there is a distinction between *salāmlek*, *ḥ□aramlek* and *ẖademlek*, three domestic areas assigned to men, women and servants respectively.

In smaller houses the number of blocks decreases as the boundaries of the estate are determined by the size of the ground floor. The blocks can develop in height – in this way many Damascenes add parts on to the roofs. The upper floor may spread beyond the boundary of the ground floor, so that it eventually joins the upper floor of a building on the opposite side of the alley.

The basement of a block is made of stone: the walls lie 1.25 meters under the floor, and they rise for a height that can vary from sixty centimetres to 1.5 meters above the floor. It is a soft and workable Ebla stone. Such material is not available in the environs of Damascus, thus the use of such stone is limited to the basement of the house.[39] Once this foundation has been built, logs are placed horizontally in order to uniform the upper side of the fundament. Each log is called a "pillow" (*mẖadde*) and is covered with tar as a protection against woodworms and seepages. Then the walls are raised by positioning logs of 1.25 meter lengths vertically at 30 centimetres intervals from each other and at right angles to the pillow. Among the logs are placed *lebn,* or earthen hammers, pieced together with a mixture of hay and corn. *Lebn* is also used as a glue ("you can make everything with it"). Another "pillow" is placed above, serving as a base for another line of vertical logs which extend to the ceiling and have one last pillow on the top. In this way the weight of the upper room – or of the roof– is borne by all four walls. whose average width is 60 centimeters. The windows, whose cornerstones are rounded off and are called *'admiġa* (singular *dimāġ*, "brain") open onto them; the upper side of the window is covered with wood laths called *baġdādi*. Niches (*īūk*) some thirty centimetres deep are also dug in to the walls, by removing logs and hammers and putting a "pillow" on the upper side of the niche; the *īūk* will be filled with ledges. If they are closed they will become wall cupboards. A "pillow" is put on the upper side of each window as well.

[38] Roujon, Vilan 1997.

[39] By contrast the entire structure of houses in Aleppo are made totally out of stone, as this material is relatively abundant in the north of the country.

The ceiling is made of parallel logs longer than those inside the walls; each of them is a beam called a "column" (*'mūd*); that is as long as the room. Each "column" goes from the top of one wall to the top of the wall on the opposite side; each juts out of the room by a few centimetres. So it stays jammed under the weight of the upper floor (or roof); the jutting part is viewable from the outside, and in Mohammed's opinion it bears an aesthetic function. A metal duct (*mijraīe*) is placed on to the jutting to funnel rainwater into the gutters in the corners of the courtyard. One or two *'mūd* can be installed perpendicularly under the beams of the ceiling in order to strengthen its structure. While in the poorer houses such a structure remains viewable; in wealthier houses the beams are covered with *baġdādi*, allowing the owner to cover them completely or leave them partially viewable, according to taste. The beams of the ceiling are painted with a burnt oil coloured paint.
In the hall at the right side of the *iūān* of Jacques Montlucon's stood a wonderful ceiling; the former owner sold it for two million Syrian pounds (about forty thousand dollars). Selling ceilings is profitable and thus very common, so that few ceiling remain in their original houses. Some people remove the ceilings from abandoned houses and sell their wood. Some craftsmen from *medīna al-qadīme* make furniture and sculptures using this decorated wood.
The replacement of a damaged column is a ticklish operation that Mohammed masters perfectly: "I can replace them all!". By fixing two vertical stakes under each of the two beams near the one that is to be replaced; the ceiling remains supported and is in no danger of collapse during the operation. Then the damaged column is cut and removed. and a new column is fitted. It is inserted into the space left empty by the removal, on the top of one wall, pushing it diagonally from below outwards; then the other tip of the column is lifted up and finally inserted it into the empty space on the top of the wall on the opposite side. The friction produced by the contact with the ceiling is reduced by lubricating the new column with soap (at least this is what Mohammed does; but each restorer has his own means and tricks). In the end the stakes from the two nearest beams are removed, and the new column is jammed into the top of the walls and the ceiling like all of the others. The entire operation "is a question of weights; it's important to know where the weak spots are"; if somebody inexperienced tries to carry it out, the ceiling may cave in. In the replacement of beams Mohammed trusts Bilāl's help. "One mistake and it'll end in tears in an Arab house". In general, any restoration task involves patience and care. "You remove a stone per day".
The walls are covered with sun-dried slabs of earth and hay, called *teben*, upon which a coating of lime is applied. *Teben* slabs are sometimes replaced during the restorations by cement. The coat of lime is covered with a mixture of water and sand to absorb the dampness caused by the lime. After having polished the wall, a coat of hemp (*qeneb*) fibre is applied as an insulator. Such covering absorbs the smoke that was once produced by oil lanterns, and now comes from cigarettes and narghilè.
As a specific capital, knowledge of traditional restoring techniques can place *mo'allimūn* in the ideal position to bargain with employers. Working hard, an expert *mo'allem*'s wage can come to 35 thousand Syrian pounds (700 dollars), well over the salary of a medium-level civil servant, that comes to 9600 Syrian pounds (190 dollars). *Mo'allimūn* bargain workers' wages with the employers; non-specialized masons earn 300 Syrian pounds per diem. Usually *mo'allimūn* specialized in restoration obtain more remarkable wages for their workers. They are charged with dividing the wages among the workers on Thursday, the last working day. Such *mo'allimūn* can afford to choose whether to accept or to reject a job: e.g. if Mohammed doesn't like the architect in charge of the restoration, he refuses to work with him, "even if he fills the fountain with money for me!".
Apart from the benefits they can make out of the direct bargain with the employers, *mo'allimūn* often resort to expedients in order to supplement their own salaries. As he's unique in knowing how to find raw materials to amalgamate *ḫabūr* and to use "traditional"

materials, the *mo'allem* often puts in higher estimates than what he expects to spend. For example, a haycock to face the walls of two rooms costs five or five hundred Syrian pounds: Mohammed often puts in a double estimate: "So, if there is any trouble during the work, everything is alright". Sometimes he resorts to similar expedients to buy a new column.
In this way workers get possession of traditional materials: it's often a re-appropriation of the production means, that normally they don't own. As Mohammed puts it,

> My children know how to read and write; I don't: I prefer to write with *my* material, lime *(kels*). Lime and *lebn* course through my veins. I talk with the walls, and they tell me how to proceed with my work.

The very product, a gentrified house, is out of worker's reach:

> if you consider that it takes at least twelve logs to build a wall, and each one costs one thousand pounds, it takes a twelve thousand pounds for a wall. A new house is cheaper: a hammer costs ten pounds and the wall is less thick.

Even architects establish a particular relation with the material. According to arch. Zabita, the restoration of a damascene house requires the constant presence of the architect on the site:

> You must see, touch the stone to sort out what the house needs. For instance, we have a ninety-centimetres wall and we have to build a window: how do we manage? To get such things one has to stay at the scene: you can't draw a project and give it to the workers, as for the new buildings. When you work at the restoration inside a house, you feel what a house wants, what it tells you. It's the house who decide. You find surprises at any time, unexpected things- so you have to change your mind and revise the project.
> I love working on the ancient houses, because one understands how the architects used to think in the past.

As workers, usually the architects in charge of the restorations don't own production means. When I asked him why he didn't live in a damascene house, which he loves so much, he answered shaking his head and saying he would like to, but it's too expensive.
Further, it seems as architects approach the problem of traditional materials more pragmatically than other gentrifiers. According to Zabita

> For those who dwell in these houses the ideal of the material is meaningless. Traditional material is important, it has some qualities, but I can't ask my clients to pay more. Those swayed on the argument agree, but others decide to face everything with cement.

Thus the spatial object is a product of a specific cultural context– beside being the product of a historical evolution and specific geographic and climatic conditions.[40] Further, the spatial object is the product of a specific organization of labour: thus, it incorporates social relations, in the shape of social labour. Gentrification rises the value of a building: to produce this object, physical and mental energy was spent. Further, there has been spent working time. *Gentrifiers* are aware that the variable "time" assures a certain outcome: according to Maya, the owner of the first hotel opened up in the Old City, "if the owner wants a hasty job, the outcome isn't good and it's knocked together". Usually in a restoration site people say "it takes two months to complete the job"- but it's a way to leave the expectation indefinite: it is well-known that a damascene house requires patience and much time. According to arch. Zabita

[40] Lefebvre 1978.

> Some owners believe that restoration is a quick handicraft. But it requires much time; the expert is required to spend hours watching and touching materials, trying to understand why a wall is built in a certain manner, studying the reasons of a certain technique- nothing is accidental in ancient houses- and acting accordingly, after having understood.

Therefore, the spatial object incorporates the time spent to produce it as well. According to Lefebvre

> in the sensorial-sensual space (practical-sensible) one can't see the very social relations, the relations of production. They are bypassed . . . . Such sensorial-sensual space introduces itself inside the visible-readable, underestimating the issues that actually dominate the social practice (i.e. the labour, the division of labour, the organization of labour). The sensorial-sensual space . . . contains social relations.[41]

Marxian analysis, applied by Lefebvre in the space at large, in the case of gentrification casts light on the question of the higher, mysterious and fluid qualities, attached to the built environment in the ancient quarters. People feel attracted to the ancient buildings, especially if they are rare, if they keep historical associations alive, and at the same time if they are inhabitable and they present all modern conveniences. People can't make out the reason of this attraction, that lies in the very mystery of that object: it's attractive because of its qualities (rarity, historical association, inhabitability, and the like); one realizes that there must be a force out of which such qualities were created; one holds that such force is 'tradition' (*al-taqalīd*), or 'history' (*al-ṭṭarīẖ*), 'costume' (*al-'adāt*), 'origin' (*al-'aṣl*), 'roots' (*al-jzūr*): people don't realize it's social labour. Interpreted in this perspective, discourses on antiquity of built environment come across as ideologies that, embedded in the space, prescribe the location of certain activities, establish the 'social standings' (fashionable or ill-famed districts, districts to invest in and districts to leave) and explain the reasons of such locations and standings.
As Berardino Palumbo puts it, 'identities', 'cultures', 'traditions', 'localities', 'authenticity', 'typicalness' are "essentialized and essentializing products of the expansion of globalization processes"[42] and

> they are caught inside mechanisms of objectification and of claim, of ideological and reflexive statement that, framed in the relations between powers, institutions and the actors of different political scenes, shape their status and very often transform them in commodities, properties exploited inside the market of differences.[43]

Once we go into all details of such ideologies in Marxian perspective, we realize that what shapes the social space are productive forces and production relations. Traces of such forces are removed from the spatial object; workers' traces are removed as well. Ideologies that mask productive forces remain.[44] Removing the traces of manufacturing processes on the one hand facilitates the operation that takes the product away from the worker; on the other hand it makes the spatial object a commodity whose higher qualities people acknowledge; the more gentrification work- removed now- was long and careful, the more the value of this commodity rises on the property market. Thus the entity called 'Arab house', produced by the objectification of a social world made of antiquity, rarity, historicity, typicalness, acquires another value- exchange value- with whom it is ready to circulate in the market of gentrified space.

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[41] Lefebvre 1978, 211.
[42] Palumbo 2006, 60.
[43] Palumbo 2003, 15.
[44] Lefebvre 1978, 210-212.

Conclusion

In order to understand the process of gentrification, and in general the processes through which social actors create space and are in turn created by it, symbolic and cultural dynamics as well as economic factors are fundamental keys. Many dimensions of practice and discourse develop and overlap in a complex space such as Damascus' Medīna al-Qadīme. Gentrification in particular entails approach, mutual influence and sometimes clashes between different *habitus* concerning the way one sees the neighbourhood, the ways and times one uses rooms and domestic spaces and the representations of space.

The gentrification of Damascus shows how an important and globally spread dynamic develops and is played out in a particular context, with idiosyncratic history and traditional practices.

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