Against Gravity

An Exploration in Post-Conflict Aleppo

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Figure 1: collage suggesting that we will always be doomed by hope ¹

Abstract

Between the years 2012 and 2015, photographer Hosam Katan documented the civil war in his home city of Aleppo. His photographs, which are assembled into a book,² capture conditions that show not only a landscape of destruction, but also elements of adaptation, joy, hope and lightness. *Against Gravity* begins with four of Katan's photographs, and explores ways that would contribute to the re-emergence of the social and urban fabric of Aleppo through these immediate situations. Qualities and elements in these photos are catalysts for architectural acts, that serve as a scaffold for re-establishing a collective and engaged city.

Once Syria's largest city and its economic hub, Aleppo was severely affected by the civil war that started in March 2011 and soon spread to the vibrant city. It became one of the main battlegrounds for war, driving millions out, killing thousands and drastically altering the urban landscape.³ The identity of Aleppo, however, should not be attributed solely on the traumatic events and years of the Syrian civil war. Despite the brutality of the war, hope found its way around the scars of the city and its people, which was well captured in Katan's photos.

Figure 2: July 10, 2014 - boys swimming in a crater filled with water. The crater was formed by a barrel bomb

Photo from the book Yalla Habibi by Hosam Katan, pages 22 & 23

Figure 3: October 28, 2015 - gutted buses used as barricades to protect civilians from snipers

Photo from the book *Yalla Habibi* by Hosam Katan, page 17

Figure 4: October 14, 2015 - people shopping for vegetables and fruits in a street market

Photo from the book Yalla Habibi by Hosam Katan, pages 40 & 41

Figure 5: February 04, 2015 - school children releasing balloons into the air

Photo from the book Yalla Habibi by Hosam Katan, pages 10 & 11

Endnotes - Abstract

1 Sadallah Wannous, a Syrian playwright and a Nobel laureate who had written extensively on politics in the Arab world, stated of theatre and politics in the early 1990s: *"We are doomed by hope, and come what may, today cannot be the end of history."*

2 Yalla Habibi, *Living with War in Aleppo*, by Hosam Katan.

3 Ataa Alsalloum, "Rebuilding and Reconciliation in Old Aleppo: The Historic Urban Landscape Perspectives" in *Reshaping Urban Conservation: The Historic Urban Landscape Approach in Action*, Volume 2 of *Creativity, Heritage and the City*, ed. Ana Pereira Roders & Francesco Bandarin, (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 57-60.

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Prologue

Being the granddaughter of originally Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Syria, I was exposed from a young age to narratives of conflicts and witnessed how wars can radically change people's lives and their relationship with the places where they once belonged. I've always found it frustrating how man-made damage can easily lead to the destruction of years of history, civilization, and not less importantly to the destruction of the image and understanding of the targeted cities and their people.

I spent every single summer of my childhood at my grandmother's house in Damascus; the place that made me first recognize my interest in bustling vibrant cities that seem to never rest. I have developed a special connection with this place, with its rich inviting culture and its history. After the escalation of the Syrian civil war, it hurt to realize that in most people's minds, and on all search engines, the place that I fell in love with as a child, is now only associated with war, destruction, crisis and violence.

When I was living in Germany, I had the chance to be part of an initiative that would help refugees find jobs that match their skills and their previous experiences. The amount of resilience and hope that I have seen from the Syrian refugees is remarkable. I learned that unlike how the rest of the world views their country, for them, Syria cannot be confined to the traumatized

war-devastated place that people see on screens now, and most of them dream of going back. Despite the scars that have developed over the past nine years, many Syrias still exist : the resilient Syria, the culturally and historically rich Syria, the Syria that is home to artists, musicians, authors and thinkers, the Syria with craters filled with water, in which children play. And I, like many others, believe that these Syrias will re-emerge.

As Arabic is my first language, I have referred to a few texts in Arabic and I have translated these myself. I have also translated a number of texts in German, written by architects or planners who have been part of the team that worked on the Rehabilitation and Development of the Old Town of Aleppo Project, which was initiated by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation years before the start of the civil war. These are cited as follows in the endnotes: Trans. MJ.

Introduction: Against Gravity

*"Aleppo is a city of memories, etched in stone, but also anchored in an intangible way in the traditions of its residents. You can restore monuments and buildings, but when the collective memory is lost, traditions forever disappear. This is why it is important not to make the old city center into a museum, at the risk of seeing a part of our intangible heritage disappear. Instead, we need to find and to keep a sensitive balance. In doing so, we have got to be like a cat: following the call to admire our city and nimbly leaping over narrow walls to revel in the abundance Aleppo has to offer us."*¹

- Hussein I. El-Mudarris, *My Aleppo*

There is no doubt that the historic, once metropolitan Aleppo, has valuable traces from the different people, identities and cultures that have inhabited, or crossed the city. Old Aleppo manifests its multilayers of architectural heritage, intangible traditions, culture, knowledge and skills, as evidence of the myriad civilizations that had flourished in the city.² While it is crucial to restore structures, and introduce new ones, it is equally important to restore the values, traditions and everyday rituals that pre-war Aleppo once had. *Against Gravity* is an exploration that aims to reconstruct few of the many facets of Aleppo, through the introduction of four architectural works in the city.

The first chapter, *The Gravity of War* gives a glimpse of the heaviness of the brutal and very complicated civil war in Syria, and specifically in Aleppo. I pay special attention to changes in the fabric and the daily life in East Aleppo. In the second and the third chapters, I want to give a glimpse into the colorful and vivid aspects of life in pre-war Aleppo: the importance of water and markets to the daily life, the central role that carpet weaving played in Aleppian culture, the vibrance of the food markets in the city and the ways in which narrow streets and flat roofs created intermediate, semi-public zones in the city. These qualities, as will become evident, informed the ideas for a set of architectural insertions.

Chapter 4, *Photographs as Sites* introduces the idea of using photographs as a point of departure for design. The four photographs by Katan, are a sort of hinge between the historic and cultural background, and my architectural proposals. I documented them through drawings, in the manner of a site surveyor.

In chapter 5, I assume the voice of a journalist who is reporting from Aleppo, as the post-conflict architectural works begin to be incorporated into the life and fabric of the city. Aleppines gather and reoccupy the Old City's streets, ruins, roofs and alleyways, they begin to resuscitate the city.

The proposed architecture is deliberately light, able to vanish (in the final chapter) when it is no longer required. Some of the architectural works may disappear, while others will be invited to stay.

Figure 6: A composition consisting of elements extracted from Katan's four photos in East Aleppo - *joy, lightness, adaptation and play*

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Chapter 1

The Gravity of War

“War arrives suddenly, uninvited, and brings with it a new normal. It has its own cadence, its own logic. It is the mundane experienced through heightened, sometimes supercharged emotions. The daily rhythm of life goes on, as it must, but with a constant undercurrent of tension, a baseline permanently shifted with the knowledge that a single abrupt event at any time – a knock on the door, an artillery shell, a sniper’s bullet – can upend everything.”¹

- Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back*

In March 2011, what started as an uprising in Syria, ended up being a full-scale, multi-sided civil war whose catastrophic aftermath has affected not only Syria, but many parts of the world. Inspired by the democratic fervor in neighboring countries, Syrians who were against corruption and the lack of political freedom, started pro-democracy demonstrations, which had a very timid beginning. Though protests were banned in Syria under an emergency law in place since 1963, many people started participating in the demonstrations to test the boundaries of what the Syrian state would tolerate. The demonstrations had eventually ignited an uprising.²

As things escalated though, the fight was no longer about who was against or for the President, as there were multiple countries and groups with different agendas that started being involved in

the battle.³ The involvement of the multiple sides added another dimension to the conflict, made it more complicated and poorly understood. The country was severely affected by this war, which resulted in the displacement of 6.2 million Syrians internally, and the fleeing of 5.7 million abroad, leading to one of the largest refugee exoduses in recent history.⁴

Almost a year after the battle had reached Aleppo, as of the 21st of July 2012, the city became divided: the eastern side of the city, which is Old Aleppo, was where the opposition had control, while the regime forces had control of the west.⁵ Aleppo, which is located in Northern Syria, about 100 kilometers east of the Mediterranean Coast and 50 kilometers from the Turkish border in the north, had a population of 4.6 million in 2010,⁶ a population that was harshly distressed by the war. Grievously, the fight in Aleppo was among the fiercest in the country, turning basic infrastructure, schools and hospitals into rubble. In December 2016, the government announced that they had taken back control of Aleppo, which did not mean that the war had completely stopped, as there was still fighting going on in the city.⁷ Now, almost three and a half years after the government took back control, life is going back slowly to Aleppo. Over the past three years, thousands of Aleppines returned to the city, trying to salvage what's left of their homes.

*"Eastern Aleppo is buzzing with shop owners sweeping away the debris, craftsmen rebuilding the old city's intricate wooden window balconies, bulldozers moving massive stones into place to reconstruct its famous mosque."*⁸

Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, occupied since c.5000 B.C.,⁹ so this is not the first time that the city has seen a major conflict. It has been won and lost by

a succession of empires, sacked by myriad invaders and reduced to rubble by epic earthquakes. Yet, the city still stands till this day, and its history that spans centuries gives it a multi-layered identity. *Against Gravity* celebrates these layers by adding yet another.

Figure 7: Map of Aleppo. Very few of East Aleppo's buildings are documented in online resources, therefore the "emptiness" in East Aleppo on this map

Endnotes - Chapter 1 | The Gravity of War

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Chapter 2

The White City: Joy in Former Times

*"In the maelstrom of pictures floating through my head, I see glimpses of my life before the war. I see my mother preparing kibbeh, I see our big family gatherings. I see myself going out and spending time with my friends in the Old City, Aleppo's most important historic site. I see myself as a boy passionate about sports who follows the news of his favorite soccer team, al-Itihad. I see a young man excited to go and see their matches wearing a T-shirt in the team color, red."*¹

- Hosam Katan, Yalla Habibi

The city that many people have come to know as a "gray" city of destruction over the past nine years, is actually known as *Halab Al-Shahba*, (Aleppo the White), in reference to the milk white stone and marble that the city is famous for. It is a city that is deeply rooted in history: Aleppo was mentioned by Shakespeare in his writings, in *Macbeth* and *Othello*, as a far-off exotic place, as at that time, the city was under the control of the Ottoman Empire and would have been a place of great mystery to the Elizabethans.² It was one of the most revered in the region, and a cosmopolitan city like other trade cities around the world. Only by 1890, it had a total of 260 schools, 120 inns and 72 public baths; Aleppo was home to the world's best inns and marketplaces.³

Due to the economic power of the city, Aleppo had historically been a target in the region, as

whoever took over it, could take other cities, including Damascus. Aleppo, nevertheless, had a significant defensive asset, which is its fortified citadel in the middle of the city.⁴ The citadel was captured and used by myriad civilizations and was used by the Syrian Army during the conflict as a military base, causing damage to this UNESCO World Heritage Site.⁵ Around the Citadel, there used to be two and three floored old houses, which looked timeworn from the outside, but as one went to the inside, the breezes of the decorated gardens, jasmine and lemon outbalance the clouded exterior.⁶

Undoubtedly, the everyday life in Aleppo has changed radically since the start of the conflict. Up until 2011, the city was a thriving metropolis, a tourist destination that charmed its people and visitors with its architecture. Streets were always bustling with people, street vendors and cars, markets were constantly busy, restaurants were full, and parks were packed with children. Most importantly it was safe. It was safe to go out by oneself for a walk or for a drink at one of the hundreds of cafés in the city.

The city was known for its special cuisine and its outstanding gastronomy. In 2005 the city of Aleppo was awarded the *Grand prix de la Culture Gastronomique*, which is usually awarded to a person or entities, and with the exception of Paris, Aleppo is the only city that had ever received this award.⁷ When it comes to music, unlike other Syrian cities, Aleppo has its own *Qudud Halabiya*, which literally means musical measures of Aleppo, and that is classical music found in both Arabic poetry form and secular music genre. The musical measures of Aleppo originate from the time when the Muslims ruled Spain but were developed later by the musicians of Aleppo. A few decades ago, many well-known Arab singers had to perform the Aleppian *Shahabandar*

coffeehouse, in order to become famous in the Arab world. The Aleppines have therefore developed a very critical ear to music. People used to say that if you have not performed in Aleppo, you have not passed the test.⁸

Figure 8: May 2009, a woman reading at a café
(Photo edited by Author)

Figure 9: July 1996, drivers stuck in traffic jam on a busy street
(Photo edited by Author)

Figure 10: June 2010, a trinket shop in Aleppo
(Photo edited by Author)

Figure 11: June 2009, a concert in Al-Sheebani school's courtyard in
the Old City of Aleppo (Photo edited by Author)

Figure 12: October 2007, members of the Syrian Academy of Gastronomy enjoying an Aleppian meal (Photo edited by Author)

Figure 13: October 2010, people having dinner with live music at a restaurant (Photo edited by Author)

Figure 14: March 2006, weaving of traditional rugs at the market
(Photo edited by Author)

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8 Ibid., Suleman Taufiq, "City of Music Tradition," 233.

Chapter 3

Aleppo: "The Breathing Body"

*"Like a membrane stretched out between earth and heaven is the continuous roofscape that extends over the Old City of Aleppo. Smaller and larger breathing holes indicate the apartment houses, caravansaries and mosques below it - buildings that have grown together wall to wall, so as to form a solid city body, as it were. Through its veins and arteries pulsates the stream of life tailored to the size of pedestrians powerfully welling up in the covered market lanes and then gradually ebbing out into a variety of narrow and crooked, residential dead-end alleyways of the individual houses, where it is regenerated in the peaceful courtyards that inhale light and fresh air."*¹

- Stefano Bianca, *My Aleppo*

The Ancient City of Aleppo was listed as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO in 1986, for its outstanding universal value,² as its urban fabric is home to various 16th and 17th century buildings including madrasas, khans, palaces, caravanserais, hammams, souqs, as well as synagogues, churches and mosques. It is a distinguished context that is authentically merged with modernity.³ This hard-architectural shell, or solid city body is brought to life by the collective daily rituals and meaningful social patterns that the Aleppines practice in the labyrinthic system of passages in the Old City. It is the organic movement of people shopping in the streets and

markets, the playfulness of children in the alleyways, the water burbling in the public basins, the rhythmic sound of looms in the mills, and families inhabiting their courtyards and rooftops, that make the body a healthy breathing body.

3.1 Public Water: The Healthy Body

The concept of providing water to the public in the streets of Aleppo, and capturing rainwater is not a foreign one, since the public water faucets, basins and fountains existed in the city for hundreds of years, and a few until this day fulfill their original purpose, and that is providing free water to the passerby. As Mahmoud Ahmad, a resident and lover of Aleppo says:

"It is so hard to imagine the architecture of Old Aleppo without its many street faucets and basins, that are spread all over the city, providing pure water for everyone; whether people going to prayers, passerby or merchants in the market".⁴

Figure 15: Water faucet and basin at Al-Sabeel park in Aleppo
(Photo edited by Author)

Figure 16: Water faucet and basin at Al-Shaebeya School
(Photo edited by Author)

These street faucets, which are a characteristic to a few cities, like Damascus and Aleppo, were once part of a big network that provided the people of these cities with pure healthy water.⁵ There is a huge network of tunnels that extends underneath Old Aleppo, reaching every house in the old city. Aleppines nowadays believe that these underground tunnels all lead to the Citadel. They say it is a way for them to flee to their fortified Citadel when the city gets attacked. However, these tunnels are in fact ancient water channels, that had once provided water to the neighborhoods of Old Aleppo.⁶

The ancient channels start in Helan, near the Central Prison of Aleppo, which is about seven kilometers north of the Old City. The water had once flowed from three main springs, moving down and penetrating the walls of Old Aleppo at Bab Al-Hadid, where it branched into a carefully built and carved network, which distributed water to the multiple public faucets and basins, as well as the houses of the old city. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the three springs started drying up, resulting in multiple attempts of drawing water from other springs to Aleppo, including the project of drawing water from the Euphrates to Aleppo, which was eventually implemented.⁷

Creativity in obtaining water was present not only in the streets of Aleppo, but in the houses too, where basins were beautiful features in a traditional Aleppian house (figure 17). Since the springs dried up in Aleppo, the population was dependent on water wells, which can get a little salty when the water is taken from the bottom of the wells. Aleppines used to dig their own wells near their kitchens, to mix the salty water with the Helan spring water which was still running through canals.⁸ They used rainwater too to stabilize the saltiness of the water that they receive. Mahmoud Heretani who was born in 1924 and raised up in Aleppo, writes about some of his water related memories:

*"For one, the Helan spring provided the city with water through canals. The second resource was rainwater that was collected in tanks below one side of the house and used as drinking water because it tasted cool and pure. That reminds me of a funny story: my mother had not stored any rainwater in October or November and told us that the rainwater was supposed to wash the rooftops. But, when it began to rain about midnight, she woke us all up to collect the rainwater and to store it in the tanks."*⁹

Some of the public faucets and basins however were constructed by the citizens of the city as a symbol of goodness and philanthropy. They are one of the wells of civilization that came about as a result of a city's topography and the kind nature of its inhabitants, who donate to build them, making drinking water available for everyone on the streets.¹⁰ While most of the large cities in the world lack this feature, freshwater flowed for hundreds of years through Old Aleppo, providing locals, tourists, cats and once transportation horses with drinking water.

Due to the construction of modern asphalt roads in the old cities, and due to the lack of maintenance, many of these channels had either been damaged or blocked, leaving most of the public faucets, except for a few of them in Old Aleppo without water.

Figure 17: A traditional Aleppian house with an internal courtyard fountain
(Photo edited by Author)

3.2 Textiles: The Productive Body

Being an important station on the Silk Road, Aleppo developed many industries, outstandingly the textile industry. The fact that Syria is located in the middle of the network of trade routes is reflected in its textiles, which fuse the Western and Oriental prints together, in addition to the authentic Syrian touch.¹¹

“This Syrian industry is as distinctive as its past, reflecting success over hundreds of years. One can feel this distinctiveness when passing through a Syrian souk, filled with richly colored textiles, blue, yellow and red, often decorated with golden and silvery lines. This has made it one of the most important holdings that you see in every Syrian house, but you will also see it in the hands of every tourist who has visited Syria, gifts to their loved ones after returning to their country.”¹²

With a high concentration of production in Aleppo, Silk remained as the main component of Syrian textiles for a long time, until the start of the 20th century, when cotton cultivation industry started growing, leading to engaging 20% of the population of Syria in the work of the production and processing of cotton and its by-products.¹³

The textile business in Aleppo is considered to be of great significance, as it made up to 66% of all local business activities in the Souq. The textile industry was booming in the 1990s in the city, as a result, some of the weaving mills moved out of the city center to the outskirts, where weaving would take place during the day and evenings.¹⁴ Everywhere, the machine looms created blaring noises:

*"The regular banging of the shuttles and rattling sewing machines you can hear today in the Old City at the edges of the Souq are from light industrial workshops. The contrasts inside these workshops point to structural change: next to old mechanical looms stand computer-guided circular-knitting machines. This is a sign for – though limited – continuance. Although the traditional products, with their patterns and colors and the abilities for producing them by hand will soon be threatened by extinction, the Old City remains intact with its traditional function. It lodges and groups together the constant business and change of people, materials and information."*¹⁵

- Holger Kuhle, *My Aleppo*

*Unfortunately, in a new era of speed and technology, the Aleppine textile tradition that lived for centuries became harder to sustain. The system of handcrafted textiles became no longer socially nor economically viable. As cheap industrial production advanced, textile craftsmen had less activity, and their limited income was so little for the younger generation who no longer carried on their parents' workshops. In the past, textile workshops would be run by several generations of a family, and having a position in the textile trade, was associated with social prestige, which is no longer the case."*¹⁶

The traditional Aleppine textiles, with their high quality and vibrant colors were threatened by extinction even before the start of the conflict in 2011. The very few workshops left in the Souq though, give us some hope that there might be still room for this ancient tradition to inhabit the streets of Aleppo again.

Figure 18: Traditional Aleppian rugs left in the sun in the courtyard of a house for drying/ cleaning
(Photo edited by Author)

Figure 19: Shop owner in his textiles shop in the old souq
(Photo edited by Author)

3.3 Food Markets: The Social Body

One of the most vivid parts of the urban body of Aleppo were the markets and souqs in the Old City, they are probably the beating heart of the city. The markets played a vital role in shaping Aleppo's urban, economic and social fabrics. The souqs grew as the broad streets of the Hellenistic city, which were subdivided along their length into the long and narrow passages of the marketplace, all covered by tall vaults.

Being one of the culinary capitals of the world, Aleppo's markets are packed with the ingredients that make up the great Aleppian dishes. Due to the old history of being on trade routes, Aleppines were known for their curiosity when it comes to cooking, as they would experiment cooking by mixing contrasting ingredients, that were exported from different continents, which had influenced their cuisine.¹⁷ The fact that the Aleppian cuisine is so rich with ingredients, made the markets too lavish with spices, grains, legumes, vegetables, fruit and meat. Claudia Mende describes her stroll in Souq Al-Attarine, which literally translates to *souq of the spice dealers*:

*"I turn into Souq Al-Attarine in the direction of the Citadel and allow myself to be driven along the stream of people. From here I stroll through the tangle of alleys, forget time and submerge into a strange world. It smells like coriander and olive soap, like coffee beans mixed with the pungent smell of slaughtered and hung out mutton. And after that is the stench of small Suzuki trucks roaring by. Fruit vendors push mountains of cherries and bananas through the dark alleys on wooden carts. Animated sellers shout out the praises of their cucumbers and watermelons, others wait patiently in front of pyramids of sunflower seeds and pistachios."*¹⁸

During the civil war, a number of Aleppo's historical markets were severely damaged, but since they are listed as World Heritage Sites by the UNESCO, they were among the first sites to undergo restoration,¹⁹ and many of them are open to the public today. Although the markets are not as lively as before, the restoration works were the start of a hopeful return of shopkeepers, vendors, shoppers and even tourists.

Figure 20: Food vendors in the old souq (Photo edited by Author)

Figure 21: Shop owner in his spices, herbs and grains shop (Photo edited by Author)

3.4 Rooftops: The Body Extended

Anyone who has visited the Citadel in Aleppo, and faced west on top of the hill would affirm that the view of the Old City is nothing but majestic. It is the continuous roofscape of Old Aleppo that forms a beautiful image, that exhibits a reconciliation between the different stone houses of the city, which were constructed over thousands of years. The countless 'breathing holes' in the roofs of the houses, which are in fact the inner courtyard of a traditional Aleppian house, is what makes the roofscape of the Old City so unique and magical. These breathing holes which are considered the true windows of the house, and the 'sky eyes' of the roof cutout. These holes are where all views are directed.²⁰

The roof in the old houses in Aleppo, has played a vital role in the everyday life of Aleppines across the years. The roof is the place where long laundry lines are found, it is where vegetables and fruits are dried are up in the summer, and where rainwater is collected in buckets. It is also the place where conversations across roofs took place between people living in adjoining houses.

The roofs of Aleppo were hardly ever abandoned. Even during the hardest days of the war, many people used their roofs to grow their own vegetables, as the city was in shortage of food.²¹

Figure 22: A girl on the rooftop of a house, where vegetables are sun-dried
Photo from the book My Aleppo, page 141- edited by Author

Figure 23: The roofscape of East Aleppo (*Photo edited by Author*)

Endnotes - Chapter 3 | Aleppo: The Breathing Body

1 Stefano Bianca, "The Breathing City Body", in *My Aleppo*, ed. Anette Gangler and Meinolf Spiekermann (Stuttgart: Edition, Esefeld & Traub, 2015), 91.

2 Ibid., Khaldoun Fansa, "The Old City of Aleppo: A Historical Survey", 33.

3 Ataa Alsalloum, "Rebuilding and Reconciliation in Old Aleppo: The Historic Urban Landscape Perspectives" in *Reshaping Urban Conservation: The Historic Urban Landscape Approach in Action*, Volume 2 of *Creativity, Heritage and the City*, ed. Ana Pereira Roders & Francesco Bandarin, (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 59.

4 Nedal Youssef, "Al-Hamawi Faucet and the Components of the Urban Fabric in the Old City", trans. MJ., ESyria, last modified May 17, 2011, <http://esyria.sy/sites/code/index.php?site=aleppo&p=stories&category=places&file-name=201105170825236>

5 Samer Ismail, "Public Charity Water in Damascus", Trans. MJ., last modified December 15, 2014, accessed February 20, 2020, <https://artravelers.com/c/624650>

6 Suhaib Anjareeni, "The Channels of Aleppo, Water Intake Turned into a Means of Destruction", trans. MJ., Al-Akhbar, last modified August 31, 2014, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/35417>

7 Ibid.

8 Mahmoud Heretani, "Childhood Memories in Aleppo", in *My Aleppo*, ed. Anette Gangler and Meinolf Spiekermann (Stuttgart: Edition, Esefeld & Traub, 2015), 150.

9 Ibid.

10 Samer Ismail, "Public Charity Water in Damascus", Trans. MJ., last modified December 15, 2014, <https://artravelers.com/c/624650>

11 "The Textile Industry in Syria: the past and the future", Syrian International Business Association SIBA, last modified July 15, 2019, <https://siba.world/textile-industry-in-syria/>

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Holger Kuhle, "Aleppo Is A Textile City - In Many Places", in *My Aleppo*, ed. Anette Gangler and Meinolf Spiekermann (Stuttgart: Edition, Esefeld & Traub, 2015), 160.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., Pierre Antaki, "Aleppo, die Hauptstadt der Gastronomie, trans. MJ., 60.

18 Ibid., Claudia Mende, "Lost in the Souq", 178.

19 "Watch: Aleppo souk reopens, representing return to former way of life", Euronews, Last modified October 18, 2019,
<https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/18/watch-aleppo-souk-reopens-representing-return-to-former-way-of-life>

20 Stefano Bianca, "The Breathing City Body", in *My Aleppo*, ed. Anette Gangler and Meinolf Spiekermann (Stuttgart: Edition, Esefeld & Traub, 2015), 18.

21 "Growing Farms on Rooftops and Land in Aleppo", BBC, last modified November 24, 2016,
<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-38032093/growing-farms-on-rooftops-and-land-in-aleppo>

Chapter 4

Photographs as Sites

*"I cried a lot when I started out as a photographer, but I had learned that I simply could not afford the time to cry. So when I finally regained function after the first shock, I adjusted my 70-300 mm lens and started to look for the images that best described what was happening around me. I pictured myself as a sniper in the midst of this chaos: I had to step a little bit away from my target, be calm, observe everything through my lens, and become one with my camera. I had to be quick: A photo every 30 milliseconds, every photo is an attempt to change the situation I was documenting."*¹

- Hosam Katan, Yalla Habibi

As with architecture, a photograph is a composition of interrelated elements; it is specific to its location and to its inhabitants, it has a specific structure, and the best photographs also possess a soul. This is how a photograph tells its story. It is a collection of data-that a photographer assembles in a singular frame. The language of the frame is a powerful agent in reading a narrative, particularly a narrative of war. Each frame presents a spatial and temporal situation; each is a site where something powerful has happened, and left its mark.

The book of Hosam Katan's photographs, Yalla Habibi, Living with War in Aleppo, is where this

exploration started. His photographs capture moments not only of war, but its aftermath. Yet their simplicity is deceptive: each tells a complex story. Using these photographs as a tool for analyzing the site, provides the possibility of understanding the context, the culture and the people who appear in them. Just by observing how people are populating a photo, can be a powerful way of telling the narrative of what has happened on that site, what is happening now and what the future of the site might be. Katan's photos do not only show us how the war changed the architecture of the East Aleppo, but also how it altered the humans of this city.

I chose four photographs to curate in detail because they spoke to me of possibilities of war remnants that can be reclaimed and reimagined in a time of renewal, of resilience, and of the hope that the people of Aleppo have shown even in their darkest days. (Other images I found so empty of hope that I covered them with paper). Like a surveyor measuring and analyzing a site for some new construction, I wanted to document the physical conditions with spatial accuracy, but also to note their material qualities, and to study their potential for intervention.

"I tell myself that there can be no proof without pictures," writes Katan. "I refuse to lose this last trace of naiveté. Often words alone do not suffice to transmit reality. Without pictures-no testimonies, even for the processing of a war once it has ended. Yes-without pictures, a war often does not take its place in the audience's consciousness. Or if it does, then it happens very late".²

- Hosam Katan, Yalla Habibi

Translating these photographs into plans and sections, annotating them with a close reading of the images, is my way to acknowledge this photo-journalist's contribution to an architectural project. Specifically, in a project where site plans and maps cannot be used as a tool to understand the aftermath of the war, nor would this to the best way to assess the situation 'on the ground'.

Figure 24: Water/Play - documentation of Katan's first photo in plan - site for the first architectural work

Figure 25: Water/Play - documentation of Katan's first photo in section

Figure 26: Barricade/ Adaptation - documentation of Katan's second photo in plan - site for the second architectural work

Figure 27: Barricade/ Adaptation - documentation of Katan's second photo in section

Figure 28: Food/ Market - documentation of Katan's third photo in plan - site for the third architectural work

Figure 29: Food/ Market - documentation of Katan's third photo in section

Figure 30: Joy/ Lightness - documentation of Katan's fourth photo in plan - site for the fourth architectural work

Figure 31: Joy/ Lightness - documentation of Katan's fourth photo in section

Endnotes - Chapter 4 | Photographs as Sites

1 Hosam Katan, *Yalla Habibi: Living with War in Aleppo*, (Heidelberg-Berlin: Kehrer Verlag, 2018), 4

2 Ibid., 93

Chapter 5

Lightness Comes to Aleppo: a report from the near future

*"Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future."*¹

- Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

For the past nine years, this once mature and healthy city has been weighed down by the heaviness of the conflict and the destruction that was caused by the war. Markets, houses, schools or mosques have been either fully or partially destroyed, making it extremely challenging for Aleppo to breathe. The genuine daily rituals that Aleppines had once practiced in the city have almost completely vanished.

Yet there are emerging signs of new life. Now, as the veins and arteries of the Body are barely pulsating again, restoration work for various buildings, especially historic ones, is taking place, forming the very first steps of bringing Aleppo back to life. Some new structures have been also constructed in East Aleppo, inviting more people to inhabit the streets, and hence playing a role in

the very slow recovery of the veins and the arteries of the city.

In Al-Shaar neighborhood for example, a new “water machine” was constructed, which looks high enough to attract attention, but not too high that it dominates the neighborhood, sturdy enough that it seems like it belongs to this neighborhood, but light enough that it suggests impermanence. The main purpose of this structure is providing water to the residents, shop owners and passerby. The structure has pouches that seem to be constantly filled with water, which is pumped up from water wells, or from rainwater tanks. This structure acts as a ‘machine’ for capturing and filtering rainwater which is absorbed by large ‘wings’ that are mechanically spread, as soon as heavy rain pours over the city. It seems like the pouring rain mingled with the movement of the wings is bringing joy to the children of Al-Shaar and replacing the crater where they once swam. On sunny hot summer noon, the wings are spread too, to provide shading for the passerby.

The platforms which can be accessed by a small lift, are wide enough for some people to fill up their different water containers, while others might choose to linger, have a conversation or study the city’s views from above. One of the platforms has a connection with an apartment in an adjacent building, whose owners have restored and renovated. The owners are using their apartment as a small shop to sell their handmade Aleppo soap, that the city is known for, as their small shop in the Old Aleppo was completely destroyed. Any water that is needed for the production of the soap is provided by the machine. In exchange, the apartment, where the soap is produced, is constantly gifting the platforms with the refreshing smells of olive oil and laurel oil of the historically famous Aleppo soap.

The structure is connected to a network of similar machines in East Aleppo, which in turn is connected to the main drinking water tanks on Al-Arqoub street. The fact that Aleppo gets a total of 60 million m³ of rainfall yearly, and only 19.5% of this rainwater is used efficiently,² makes these structures a compelling practice for using rainwater, supporting the recovery of the water supply system, which was exacerbated by the war as many drinking water projects stalling due to the lack of maintenance and operational financing, or being destroyed. Although the water machines were constructed after the war as a response to what the conflict has created in Aleppo, they are influenced by the public water faucets and basins that have existed in the city for thousands of years.

Figure 32: Location of the Water Machine in Al-Shaar neighborhood

Figure 33: Adjacency of the Water Machine from a site for water tanks, which are part of Aleppo's water infrastructure

Figure 34: The formation of a post-conflict water network, connecting a number of water machines to the water infrastructure in east Aleppo

Figure 35: A conceptual model of the Water Machine

Figure 36: A Water Machine with accessible platforms emerges from the crater in Al-Shaar neighborhood

Figure 37: The connection to the local water network and water wells

Figure 38: Movable parts - wings - for capturing rainwater

Figure 39: Pouches for the storage of rainwater after filtration

Figure 40: Mechanically controlled wings spread widely on hot sunny days providing shading

Figure 41: Connection to an apartment in the adjacent building

Figure 42: Apartment used as a soap shop

Figure 43: Aleppines populating the new Water Machine

Figure 44: The first post-war architectural insertion

Another newly constructed structure is found on Bustan Al-Qasr Street, which leads to Karaj Al-Hajez, the main checkpoint that separated east and west Aleppo in the years of the war. Gutted buses were placed on Bustan Al-Qasr Street and were used as barricades to protect people from snipers in Al-Eza'a area. Crossing this checkpoint during the worst days of the war was so risky and impossible, in most cases. Some people still had to try, as their families or their jobs would be on the other side of the city. When food or medicine is not available or extremely overpriced on one side of the city, family members on the other side would try to smuggle whatever their families need, which if caught, could easily lead to being killed. Bustan Al-Qasr was in fact called the "street of death" due to the large number of people who were killed there.

The new promenade on Bustan Al-Qasr acts as a 'weaving' machine; it connects the once separated districts in east and west Aleppo and their inhabitants, weaving back what the war had once torn. It also provides spaces for the revival of the weaving tradition, and the production of the Aleppian textiles, with their unique patterns. The weaving promenade is slowly bringing life back to the 'street of death', as it creates spaces for Aleppines to gather, practice the traditional weaving of their city, while simultaneously commemorating the bravery many civilians had shown on this street during the conflict.

The almost extinct traditional Aleppian patterns with their long history, have already started being weaved on Bustan Al-Qasr. Now after the war is over, Aleppines are appreciating their culture more than ever, and many of the masters of weaving from the older generations, are doing their best to pass on their skills to younger people. To them, weaving is not just a craft; it's part of their identity, a multi-disciplinary and multi-layered subject with an economic and a social aspect.

Figure 45: Location of the Promenade on Bustan Al-Qasr Street

Figure 46: Conceptual model of the Promenade

Figure 47: Site plan

Figure 48: Providing space for re-inhabiting the street

Figure 49: Traditional hand looms attached to structure

Figure 50: Newly woven textiles populating the street

Figure 51: Plan details

Figure 52: The second post-war architectural insertion

Some of the new additions to the city have a smaller scale, more simple but equally joyful. One of these additions are the very long dining tables which are placed in weekends in various narrow streets in East Aleppo. The tables, though being pieces of furniture, movable and re-usable, seem to be bringing a large number of people together at the same time. Meals are shared on these tables, conversations are exchanged, and street vendors are being provided with the spaces, and the crowds that they need to sell their best foods.

Figure 53: Main location for the public Dining Tables

Figure 54: Dining Tables as a way for placemaking in the streets of east Aleppo

Figure 55: The third post-war architectural insertion

The fourth insertion into the Old City are strange aerial machines, so light that they literally float over the city. Their main use seems to be aerial surveillance and the study of the city, as part of Aleppo's reconstruction plans. They provide a way for city planners, architects and NGOs to travel above the roovescape of Aleppo, study the damage and plan for the re-stitching of the city. The machines are spacious enough that they can be used by the planners and architects, at the same time as the individuals carrying surveillance are doing their job. They form a joyful post-conflict method of overseeing Aleppo, whose sky was once burdened by bombs and smoke only.

While slowly hovering above the city, these ephemeral observatories also perform a kind of 'stitching' of the city's body. They are used for seed- and flower-bombing; imitating what is already happening in nature, as compacted compost, stuffed with seeds is tossed over the roofs of Aleppo, with the hope to trigger the growth of plants on the roofs, where a blanket of thin earth would be prepared.

Many old houses in Aleppo already have some very young plants thriving on their roofs. Some destroyed houses had their own share of earth and seeds dispersal. Many Aleppines say that they enjoy, at least for the time being, the fact that in some areas, rubble is now covered by plants. While riding one of the aerial machines now, it looks like the Body of Aleppo is becoming one again. It looks like it's breathing casually.

Figure 56: Starting location for the new Aerial Machines

Figure 57: Seed bombing on roofs in Karm Al-Jabal neighborhood

Figure 58: Thriving plants on roofs

Figure 59: The fourth post-war architectural insertion

In the same manner that Aleppo had throughout history celebrated diversity, tolerance and co-existence, Aleppo appears to welcome this new post-conflict architecture and accept it as part of the growth of a new urban layer. These post-conflict interventions are constructed with the aspiration to be just like Aleppo; a city that is big enough to be disorderly, unclean or impolite, but is orderly, clean and polite in its own special way, with humility, tenderness and warmth.³

Endnotes - Chapter 5 | Lightness Comes to Aleppo: a report from the near future

1 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Translated by Patrick Creagh (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 7.

2 *"Climate in Aleppo Syria"*, accessed February 12, 2020,
<https://weather-and-climate.com/average-monthly-Rainfall-Temperature-Sunshine,Aleppo,Syria>

3 Susan Babaie, "Cities are Personal", in *My Aleppo*, ed. Anette Gangler and Meinolf Spiekermann (Stuttgart: Edition, Esefeld & Traub, 2015), 77.

Chapter 6

Postscript: Gravity Returns

*"Gradually, more and more noises, tones and sounds creep into your consciousness, become more intense and suddenly they define the face of the city just as much. You hear the many birds, you fly together with them, listen to Sabah Fakhri's songs and dance to them, you notice the sound of your own steps that echo in harmony on the walls of the narrow streets. Raindrops fall as well, sometimes lightly, sometimes heavily, and in the end, they leave us behind an air that refreshes all the senses. You hear the happy cooing pigeons that drink the water that has collected on the rooftops of houses. Then, the muezzin begins the call to prayer with a beautiful voice. It is a unique symphony that speaks to the spirit and to the senses, a charming combination of sounds that seem surreal and yet is reality. Then, the time of tranquility begins. Nature sleeps until, with every next sunrise, a new symphony of this zest for life of Aleppo sounds."*¹

- M.Ammar Ghazal, My Aleppo

When the civil war took over Aleppo in 2011, there were countless of reports, articles and opinions that predicted that the re-birth of the city is not impossible, as Aleppo had re-emerged from ashes numerous times throughout history. Many believed that Aleppo as always, returns and moves on. As it is apparent today, they were not wrong.

The war had undeniably left its own mark on the city and its people, Aleppo, however, seems to be fully vibrant again. Many Aleppines that had fled the city are back, and many could restore their houses. Others are living in some of the new post-conflict housing projects. Old houses in the Ancient City, gained so much attention from a number of local and international architects, that have put so much effort to bring life back to them. The traditional Aleppo houses, with their beautiful courtyards that seem to inhale sunlight and air had persisted once again. The 'veins and arteries' of the city are energetic and busy, the souq is crowded, and the area around the citadel is cheerful and celebratory. People are back to their mosques and churches, and children are in their renovated schools.

Al-Shibani school has been completely restored, concerts and language classes are taking place there even more frequently than before the war. Tourists are back, and hence the restaurants are thriving, where traditional Aleppian food and music gracefully merge.

The weaving Promenade on Bustan Al-Qasr street is bustling with people. Rugs and different textiles that bear the signature patterns of that recent time are now seen in all the shops nearby, and on cleaning day hang from balconies of the neighboring buildings. People are not depending heavily on the water machines like before, as life within the renovated buildings are brought forward.

The aerial machines are visible only in the distance and at higher altitudes, enroute perhaps to another city fighting for its survival in the aftermath of war.

Aleppo breathes again

Figure 60: Years after the introduction of the architectural insertions

Endnotes - Chapter 6 | Postscript: Gravity Returns

1 Ammar Ghazal, "Loving Aleppo", in *My Aleppo*, ed. Anette Gangler and Meinolf Spiekermann (Stuttgart: Edition, Esefeld & Traub, 2015), 125

Sktech Appendix

The following pages are a number of sketches that have been a main generating tool of the architectural insertions in Aleppo. *Free* hand sketching has been a compelling way of experimenting with designing *against* gravity.

no can dog, if you like.
early ad architecture: justice,
early, truth, goodness, mind God.
no can dog seriousness but
it play.
Larset Walter.

02.02.2020

"Das eben ist Aleppo: West und Ost stoßen hier aufeinander, aber nicht zusammen. Aleppo hat von beiden Himmelsrichtungen profitiert, liegt die Stadt doch an der Schnittstelle zwischen Mittelmeer und Vorderasien!"

p. 13
My Aleppo

22. 01. 2020

25. 01. 2020

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