

Q&A: Can There Be a Just Reconstruction of Aleppo?

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Four years ago, Aleppo was the site of one of the Syrian war's most brutal urban assaults, as regime forces and their allies were in the final stages of recapturing the city's besieged eastern neighbourhoods from rebels. That December, they succeeded.

The result was what Alhakam Shaar, a researcher and native of Aleppo, calls a "semi-ghost town," neighbourhoods now largely empty of residents, their apartment blocks in ruins, and debris still strewn across the streets years after the battle ended.

Reconstruction has been slow and many residents remain cut off from their homes and unable to carry out repairs without [stacks of documents that are difficult to obtain](#).

What would a just reconstruction of Aleppo look like, and what parts of the urban fabric of the city must be preserved during that process? Shaar has attempted to tackle these questions as part of The Aleppo Project, a group of researchers and scholars based, until recently, at Budapest's Central European University. The initiative aims to document the destruction of Aleppo, as well as the more intangible part of the city's fabric that must be preserved amid reconstruction.

"It's more about the social structure," says Shaar. "Not just the physical environment, but the experiences of people in their homes, how these communities ruptured."

Can you tell me about what The Aleppo Project does? What issues of reconstruction justice do you focus on?

The Aleppo Project started in 2015, hosted at Central European University [in Budapest] until October 2020—now it is independent.

The idea was to try to make sense of what is happening to the city with an outlook to the future. How can we rebuild, and not just physically? We never proposed planning for the city, for example, but rather it's more about the social structure of [Aleppo], trying to document some of the destruction—again not just of the physical [environment], but of the experiences of people in their homes, how these communities ruptured and what can bring them back. What is important to bring back? What are some of the factors that everybody thinks are important for people to return?

The problem when we talk about reconstruction, including in places like Beirut or Kabul, we see that there is no consultation with those who are most impacted. Why? Because [oftentimes] they are no longer present. Now, there is involvement from multiple UN agencies and multiple international organisations such as the [Aga Khan Trust](#). And they are building *despite* the displaced, not *for* the displaced.

There are ways where this [reconstruction] is important, such as rebuilding monuments, because they do give people a sense that they are going back to a city with infrastructure, with a face.

But it is not just the face of the city [that was destroyed] but also people's homes, their workshops.

The Aleppo Project tries to highlight these issues, and also to write an account of what life in the city was like before the war, and how life changed during the war, what's preventing people from returning, what their views are on the future of the city, etc. We have hosted blog entries by people

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from Aleppo, and by both Syrian and non-Syrian specialists. We highlighted some of the key changes as they happened. We have hosted conferences about these issues, and we have done surveys as well.

Today, how would you characterise what the reconstruction process is looking like in east Aleppo's more informal neighbourhoods? Is it a fair assessment to say that most rebuilding is done by residents themselves, at their own expense, as opposed to areas of Old Aleppo that are maybe seeing more organised assistance?

There is little of that, very little. The contrast with the souq [of Aleppo's old city] is that many of these shops were high-value real estate. They were owned by wealthier people who lived in west Aleppo. Then they have this institutional backing from the local council, while in east Aleppo you do not have that. So, it was really left to people, who had even worse means to travel, such as for those in Turkey, where, if they left, they might not be able to come back at all.

What that is translating into is that it is sparsely populated, unlike before when it was a very dense part of the city. It is half of the city. Now it is a semi-ghost town. Until now, there are many streets that are strewn with rubble.

You do not have a Marota City [project]. I think it is in large part related to Aleppo not being the capital. It is a city of equal size and importance, but it is away from the eyes of the people in power.

To what degree do you think there is a desire or even an ability for east Aleppo residents and property owners to repair their properties? How many people are either willing or able to obtain so-called "damage licences" in order to carry out these repairs? Can such a process, which involves documents that are difficult to obtain, even be considered part of a "just" reconstruction?

I believe that this might be what I was talking about, that the municipality allowed people, giving them permits to repair damage if people in the upper floors can prove it. The issue for this specific detail is that it requires a certain minimum of people who are not just present but also willing to shoulder this burden.

Not only do you have a damaged apartment building in an abandoned neighbourhood, whose price is incredibly low, but you also have to go and, at your own cost, support the structure to be rebuilt. That's a huge task. Yes, many people will find it convenient, they will find it better than waiting for the municipality to pull it down, in which case you have lost your property forever, and so have your neighbours. This ties in with the problem of those who are outside the country, how they can even do such paperwork. Technically, they can, through Syrian embassies and consulates. In Turkey that would be the Syrian consulate in Istanbul. For Syrians, it would cost an arm and a leg to go to Istanbul and then return to wherever they live, and to do the paperwork. And then there are actual fees.

So, it is a costly task, and this is something we often do not pay attention to.

Construction driven by the owners, directly or through relatives, with oversight from the municipality, is the best idea. And that is the kind of reconstruction that is very much not there in most of east Aleppo.

What would a "just" reconstruction of east Aleppo then look like, in more detail?

First off, lift the obstacles, lift the barriers for people to return. There is active power [in place] to prevent them. Other countries need to cooperate as well, to allow Syrians some freedom of movement.

Secondarily: compensation. People have the right to be compensated for what was destroyed. This can take the shape of a collaborative [process] where residents identify their needs, they are visited by consultants from the government, and there could be something like microfunding. The Syrian government should rebuild infrastructure, which is happening currently at a very shy pace.

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A third issue, interestingly on the subject of infrastructure, the Syrian regime did destroy a lot of facilities such as schools, hospitals, including the Al-Quds Hospital in east Aleppo. The Syrian regime rushed to rebuild this hospital, and the reason is that they wanted to erase any evidence of their [crimes].

Here we see the regime actively trying to erase the evidence, and this ties in with the issue of pulling down these destroyed buildings. It is out of sight, out of mind. This is an issue of memory, moral justice, and financial justice.

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