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Rebuilding Aleppo. A Rewriting Matter

Abstract

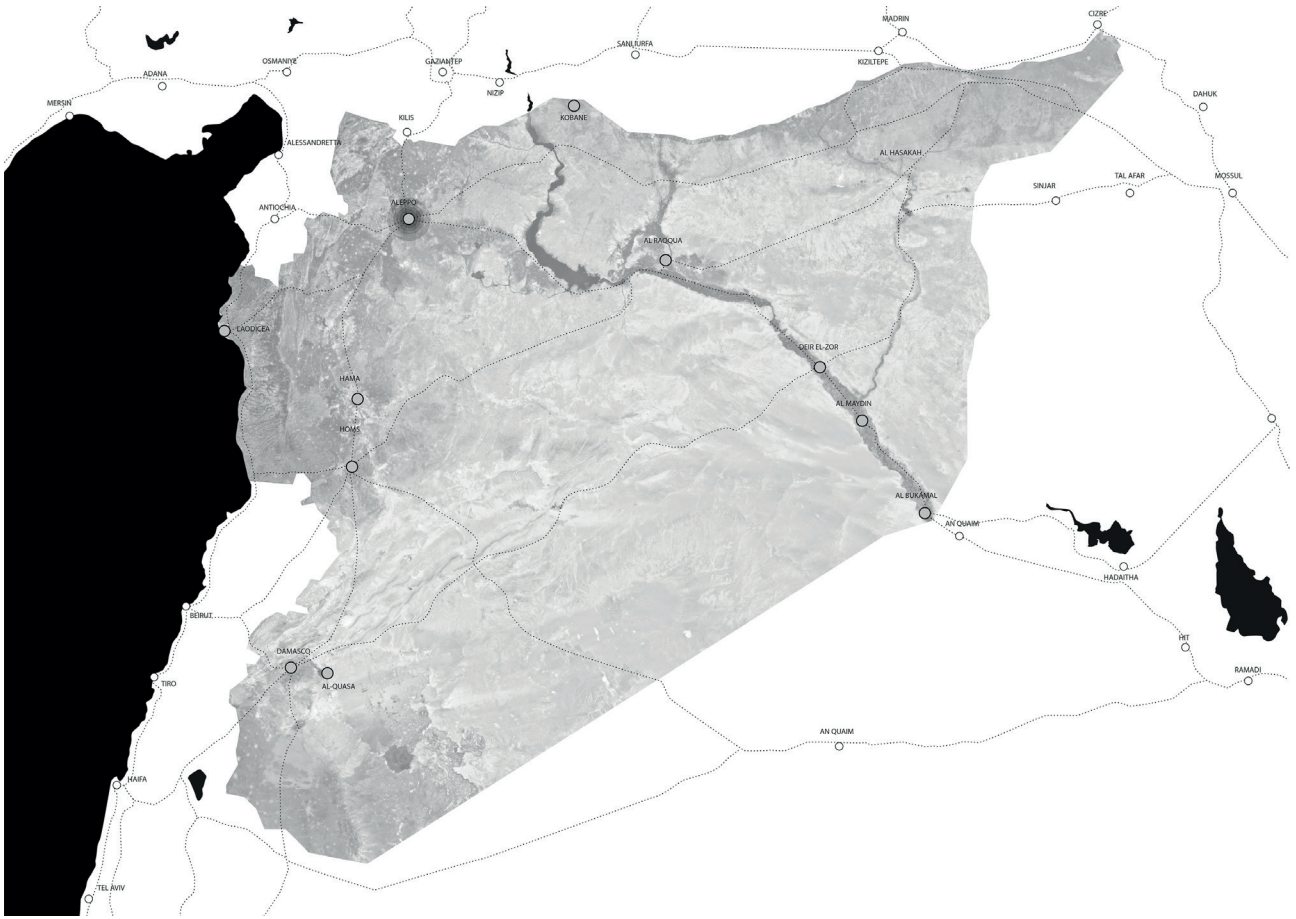
The increasing political and economic instability in the Middle East region has caused an emergency condition that directly affects the architectural heritage of cities, so much to speak, in some cases such as Aleppo, of urbicide, or deliberate destruction of the city of man. This raises again some reflections on the role of the discipline of architecture in the process of reconstruction, that is, on what are the limits, the criteria, and the instruments able to operate critically in these contexts. The current state of the city of Aleppo thus offers the opportunity for an investigation aimed at establishing an admissible framework of operational strategies to preserve the identity of places, conveying the elements that have characterized the urban phenomenon over time.

Keywords

Aleppo — Critical Reconstruction — Architectural Rewriting

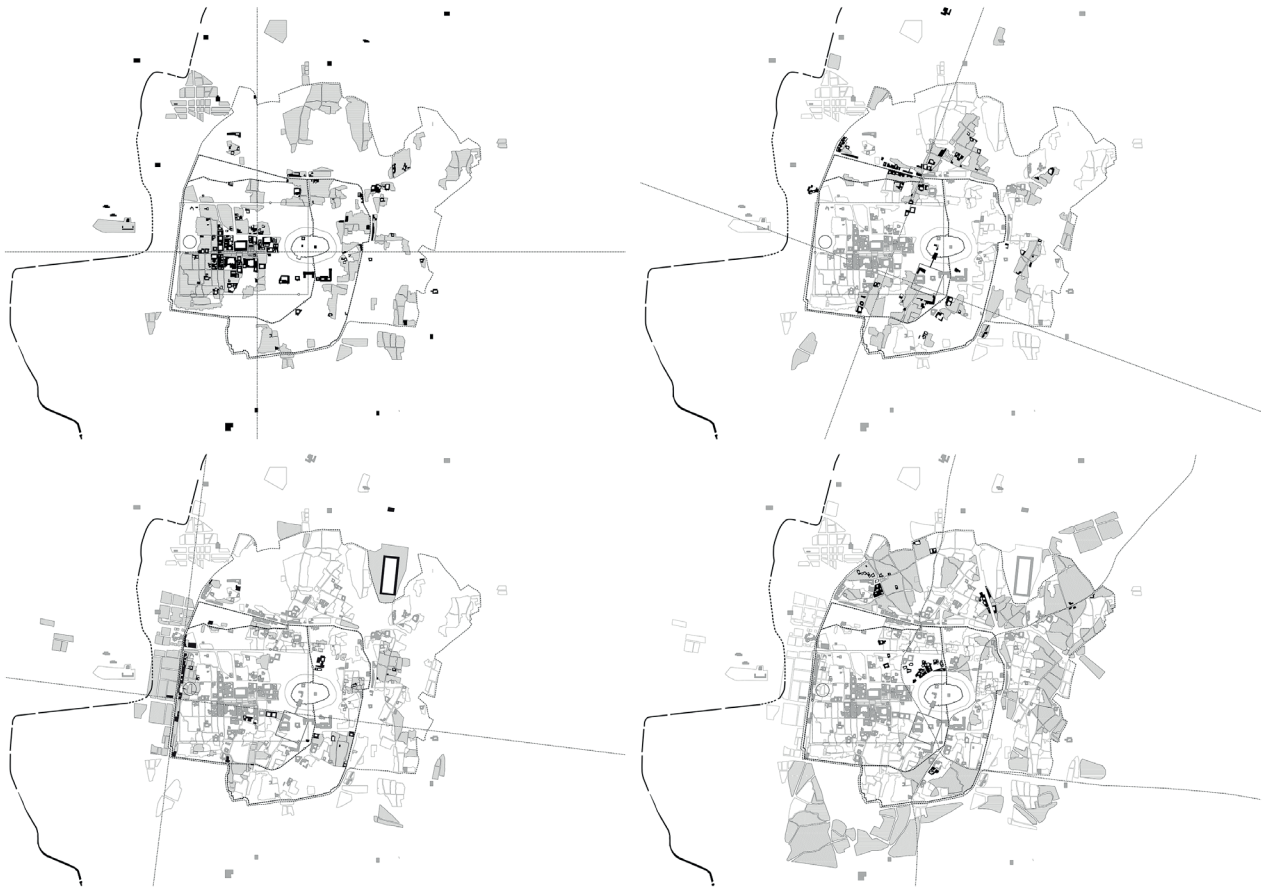
The architectural heritage of a significant number of Middle Eastern cities stands nowadays in a state of emergency following a conflict situation that has now become permanent. In this context, the mutilations reported by the city of Aleppo due to the recent civil war offer the necessary resources for a general reflection on the issue of the city's reconstruction (Figs.1-2). Its millenary history crystallized in the urban form makes the weight of the destructions so significant as to direct scientific research, and here we refer to research on composition in architecture, to question again how to rebuild such an architectural heritage. In other words, to investigate some admissible criteria in the reconstruction of a piece of the historical city that can no longer be recovered with actions aimed solely at the conservation of the architectural artifact. But what then are the limits and objectives of such a study?

In the first place, we should recognize that a field of investigation such as that of reconstructions, moves research to ethically address issues related to design practice¹, admitting that the contribution of the discipline of architecture to the reconstruction process consists in identifying a framework of admissible intervention strategies, operational criteria, compositional techniques, aimed at critically handing down the elements that have conditioned the evolution of the physical environment as permanent factors. Strategies that would have the task of preserving the forms and methods of use of space that human activity has produced, case by case, settlement by settlement, city by city throughout its history; to preserve, therefore, the cultural identity of local populations. On the other hand, safeguarding the identity of places becomes a necessary action in post-war reconstruction contexts, where more frequently



Figs. 1-2
Territorial overview of the city of Aleppo. Drawing by the author.

Planimetric outline of the city of Aleppo, in evidence the historical center. Drawing by the author.



Figs. 3-4

Urban analysis of the city's settlement structures, from Roman centuriation systems to medieval informal settlements. Drawing by the author.

Overlap of settlement systems. Drawing by the author.



we observe premeditated aggressions against the architectural heritage of cities, their symbols, their culture, which, without means terms, we could define as attacks on the collective memory of which architecture is an active witness. It is a situation aggravated by the production and growth processes of contemporary cities, which are less and less inclined to critically respond to contextual demands than to produce self-referential mutations in the urban structure, independent of the aesthetic-functional needs that characterize the human environment².

Hence the need to set up the reconstruction of the city of Aleppo starting from a more aware knowledge of the physical environment, aimed at deciphering the generative processes that have characterized the evolution of the architectural phenomenon over time (Figs. 3-4). Therefore, we talk about transposing into the design practice those permanent factors, or invariant elements, traceable in the dialectical and non-random relationship between architecture, city, and territory. More precisely, the concept of “invariant” intends to evoke those stable relationships over time between morphological and typological data³. In the case of Aleppo and, more generally, in Middle Eastern cities, this would mean first recognizing the archetype of the enclosure as a permanent factor in the construction of the city and architecture, and that this factor, or invariant element, is the response to specific contextual instances.

On the other hand, it is legitimate to argue that a conflictual relationship between the anthropogenic environment and the natural one has produced settlement modes characterized precisely by that gesture of appropriation of space that, through an element of separation such as a wall, a fence, or a defensive system, divides the city from the countryside as well as the private house from the public space⁴. Over time, this antithesis between human and natural environment has produced an evolution of the urban organism by budding of typological units with a central courtyard, generating a formal uniformity and density typical of Middle Eastern cities. Characteristic that, the one of uniformity of the urban phenomenon, is caused even by the strong symbolic charge attributed by Islamic thought to architecture and urban form, tending to prefer a semantic ambivalence of buildings concerning their intended use⁵.

In the reconstruction process, this search for the invariant leads us to consider not the single architectural element as the structure of the physical environment. That would consist of deciphering, on the one hand, the settlement modalities with which the monumental emergencies are organized in the space of the city and, on the other hand, how their presence has influenced the development of the residential fabric, which is, in term of quantity, the main factor in the evolution of the urban form. So that, we should admit that the growth of Middle Eastern cities has not been subordinate to a programmed planning process, but that it has taken place around settlement strongholds such as the mosque, the governor's palace, or the structures dedicated to trading (for example, the constant presence in Islamic cities of the typological element of the Souk)⁶.

If it is true that we can recognize in the urban structure of Aleppo a similar attitude to grow by the addition of architectural units around a central monumental nucleus, represented in this case by the Bazaar and the Citadel, it is equally true that, contrary to what happens in the cities of an Islamic foundation, there are pre-existing settlement models that contributed significantly to define the physical structure of the city. Of

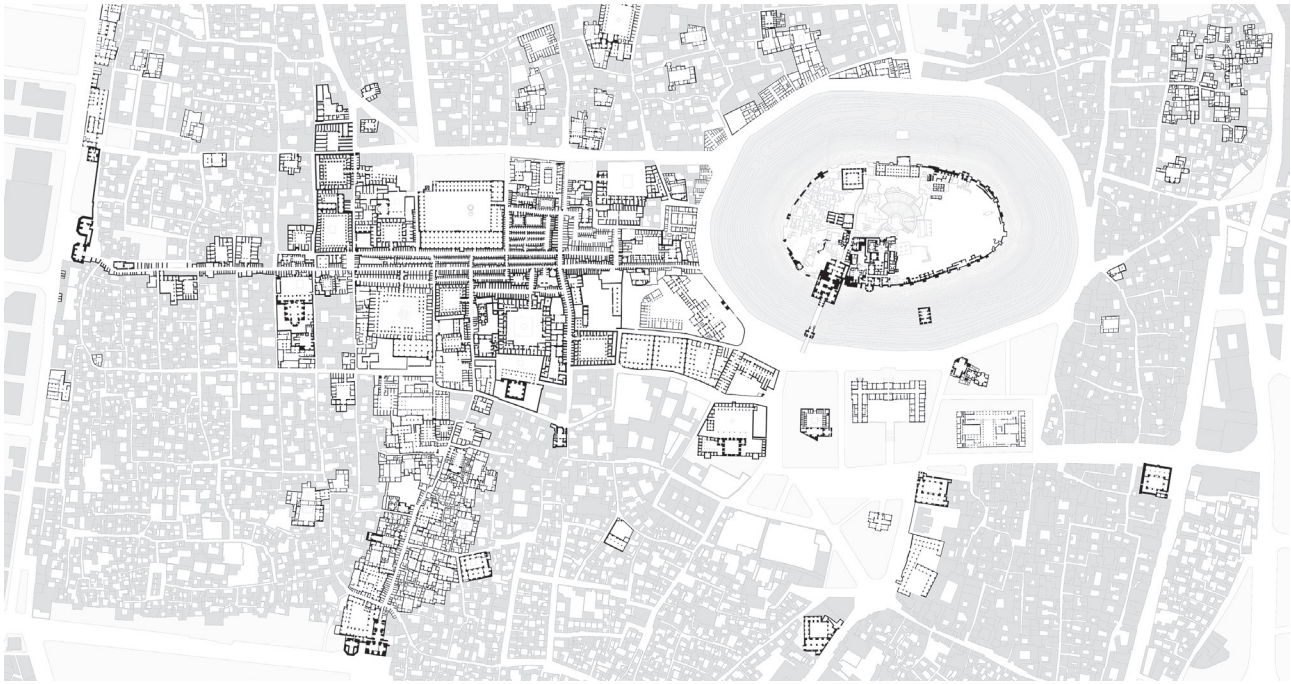


Fig. 5

The typological structure of the Bazaar of Aleppo. Drawing by the author.

these models, some are directly recognizable from an analysis of the typological characters of the pre-existing structures, such as the permanence of the ancient *via recta* of Hellenistic matrix, later confirmed as the *decumanus* of the Roman centuriation system, which, over time, has played a fundamental role in the construction of the monumental system of the Bazaar and the Souk. Others can be traced through a more careful analysis of the urban layouts and the road system, from which it is possible to observe the presence of two other systems of Roman centuriation which, in addition to influencing the orientation of the building fabric, played a decisive role in tracing the dimensions of the urban blocks⁷.

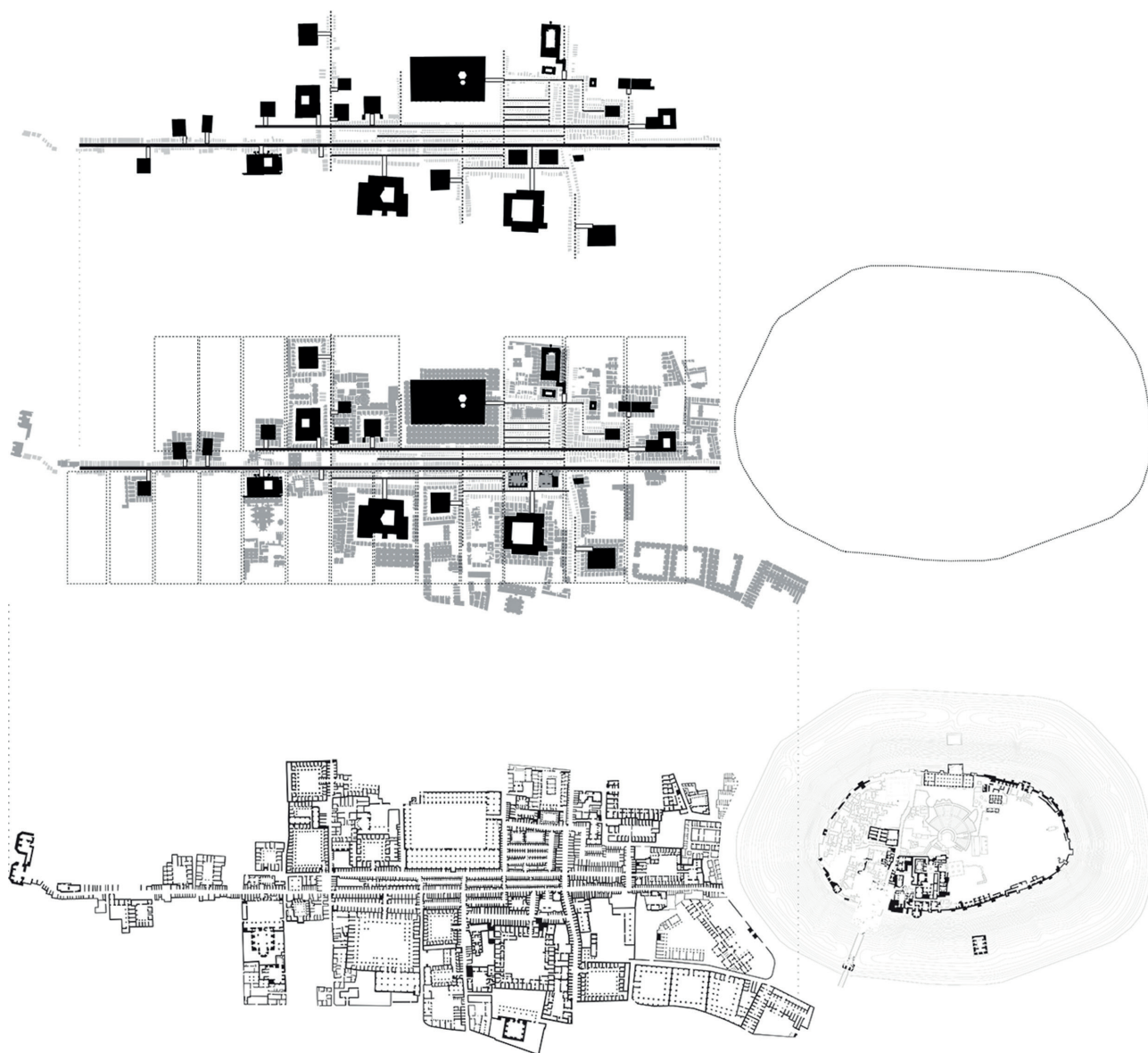
Therefore, the reconstruction of the mutilated or severely damaged sectors of the urban structure of the city of Aleppo would consist of a critical and selective choice of those permanent elements still susceptible to transformation. In other words, we should accept operationally and critically not only the elements recognizable through an analysis of the epidermal characterizations of the urban structure, but also those factors still operating that have influenced over time the construction of the architectural phenomenon.

Specifically, the recovery of some settlement constants that characterized the monumental structure of the Souk would seem a necessary action to preserve and integrate the original geometries and proportions, regaining in the reconstruction project that attitudes demonstrated by the pre-existence to grow by a linear succession of typological units with a central plan arranged along the axes of the Souk (Figs. 5-6). In that sense, the way how the architectures are grafted along the linear structure of the Souk can be experimentally reproduced in new formal solutions, preserving those settlement modalities typical of the area.

These expedients in the choice of the settlement strategy would also allow us to complete the mutilated parts by marking the figurative autonomy of the new intervention while maintaining the invariant elements of the architecture of the Souk unaltered. In fact, in the urban transformation processes, it would be necessary to update the figurative code and the methods of use of spaces aimed at creating a combination between

Fig. 6

Conceptual model of the settlement structure of the Souk. Drawing by the author.



new and old, encouraging a dialectical relationship between the historic building and new construction that involves both the integration of new functional solutions as well as a figurative deformation of the original architecture. At the typological level, this can be translated into a greater complexity in the articulation of the internal spaces, achieved through the integration of new volume and surface units which, for example, in the case of the Souk could take place in the conquest of a basement to guarantee a doubling of internal routes. In addition to unifying the entire plant, the choice of transferring part of the secondary activities of the Souk to the basement would allow the acquisition of new spaces, albeit contained in the geometry of the original section.

So that the new architectural organism would be structured as a complex system which, in addition to reconnecting the parts of the ancient Souk, would potentially be able to distinguish its figurative charge from the set of pre-existing structures and, at the same time, to offer new spaces and volumes for the development of the market activity. It should also be specified that, in this process of functional integration of the typological data, the invariant adopted depends, case by case, on the specific characteristics of the existing building. For example, in the structures replacing the Khans - courtyard buildings mainly used for activities related to trade, used as a landing point for goods before their sorting within the Souk - the typological invariant is identified in the centrality of the open space organized around a courtyard, but with greater levels of complexity in the planimetric organization to ensure, with an equivalent system, a different attitude in the use of spaces (Fig. 7).

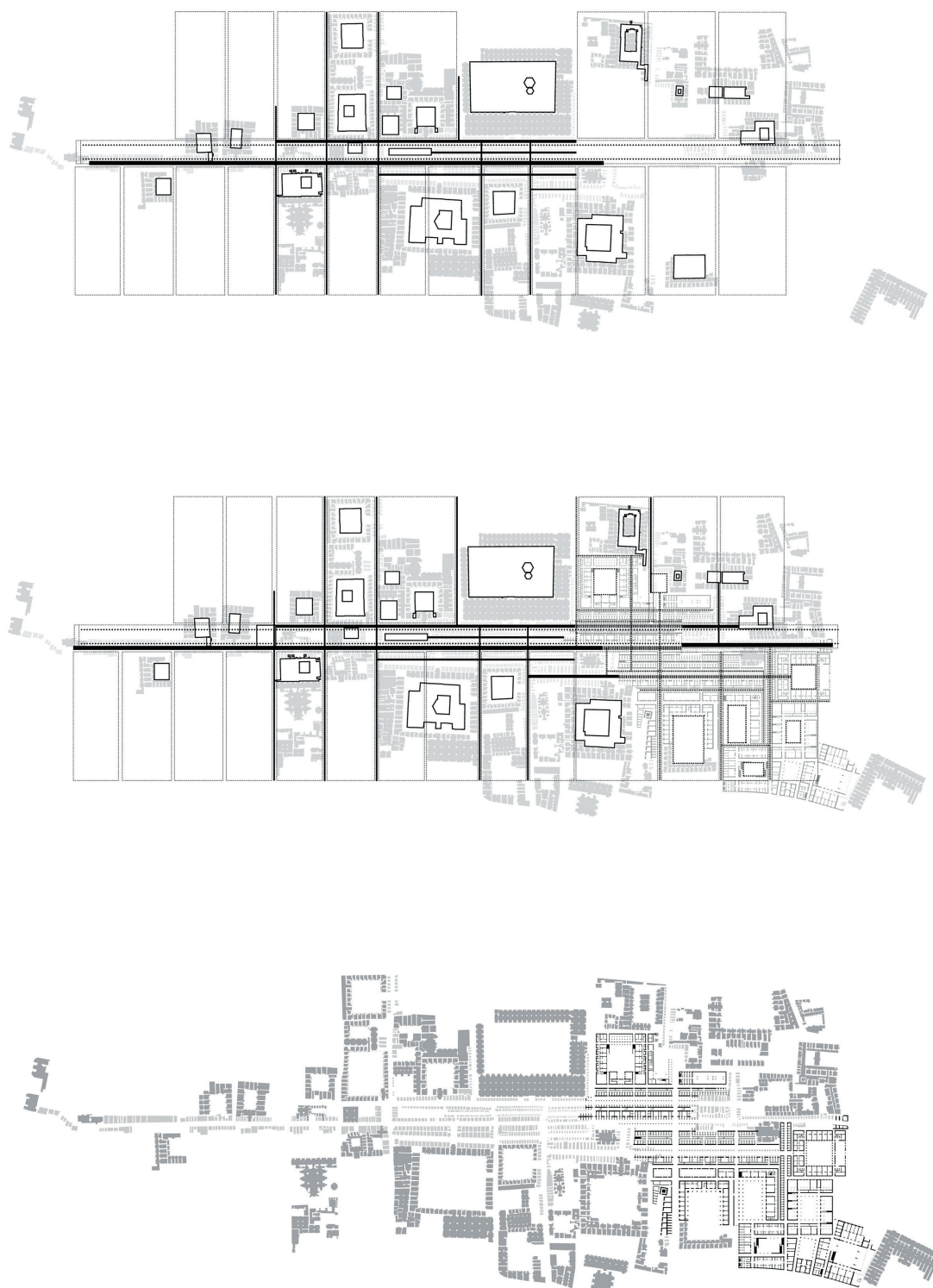
It is a case, that of the reconstruction of the monumental system of the Souk of Aleppo, which can be taken as a paradigmatic in the search for a methodology with which to critically approach the reconstruction of the city. In other words, the conditions of the ancient Souk of Aleppo, where, due to the huge amount of damage reported, conservation alone cannot be considered as the only admissible action, represent an occasion for an experimental investigation aimed at identifying a possible methodological approach susceptible to generalization and, therefore, potentially extensible to other sectors of the urban structure, if not even to other contexts. All this through operations aimed at actively recovering the elements of the urban phenomenon: the construction of historical knowledge of the architectural artifact to reproduce experimentally those qualities still admissible in design practice; the recognition of invariant elements in handing down those ways of using space that remain as constant factors in the architecture of the city; an analytical understanding of the structural and perceptual qualities of places, to transpose not so much the irrationality, the picturesque elements of the historical city as the measures, the proportions of space, the syntax of the elements that make up the urban structure.

We speak of aesthetic, spatial, figurative qualities that the city and architecture can offer when it demonstrates an ability to critically convey that latent identity contained within the elements that compose the urban structure. An identity of forms built through superimpositions, transformations, reconfigurations of the physical structure of the city, like a text that, erased and rewritten several times, maintains traces, presences/absences witness of a past still alive and recognizable through a more careful analysis of the epidermal surface of the writing space.

Space, that of the city, which, like an urban palimpsest, in its present

Fig. 7

Settlement model for the reconstruction of the ancient Souk, conceptual schemes. Drawing by the author based on the thesis project by Stefano Davolio "Re-writing Aleppo. The reconstruction of the city center"; supervisor: prof. Domenico Chizzoniti; Tutors: arch. Flavio Menici, prof. Stefano Cusatelli; A.A.2017/2018.



condition also hosts the memory of its previous configurations. And it would be enough to critically recover these traces, these epidermal characterizations, made of discontinuity, of collisions between elements of distant eras, of syntactic dissonances to imagine building the future image of the city in continuity with its history. It is not a question of solving the problem of design by taking refuge in an uncritical, and therefore not problematic, use of forms and types from the catalogue of history, but of building a creative path starting from a dialectical comparison with the elements of tradition.

In this sense, it would be feasible to approach the reconstruction of the city of Aleppo, and not only the case of the Souk, as a process of syntactic reorganization (read rewriting) of the formal, settlement, and figurative elements that make up the architecture of the city, building the new by recovering, as Guido Canella would say, «the figures, the syntagms of architecture, through their gradual and well-founded redemption from a subjection to the catalog of history»⁸. It is a process, the one of architectural rewriting, that critically accepts the persistent factors within both the apparent and the hidden structure of the city, acquiring in the creative process its main urban facts in their physical and conceptual consistency. In this way, approaching the reconstruction of Aleppo as a process of architectural rewriting would mean recognizing both the permanent elements in the urban structure and the emblems, images, and figures behind the city's forms and then reorganizing them into new formal systems. This conceptual analogy between reconstruction and rewriting aims at suggesting a methodological approach that goes beyond the more orthodox “as it was where it was” to direct the creative process towards a higher degree of typological and figurative experimentation.

Notes

¹ We refer to the definition of “ethics” given by Massimo Cacciari during the conference held on Giancarlo De Carlo entitled Participation, Ethics and Future organized by the Ordine degli Architetti di Milano on December 19, 2019.

² Harvey, David. 2013. *Città ribelli. I movimenti urbani dalla comune di Parigi a Occupy Wall Street*, Milano: Il Saggiatore; Lefebvre, Henri. 2014. *Spazio e Politica. Il diritto alla città*, Verona: Ombre Corte.

³ Cfr. Aymonino, Carlo. 1977. *Lo studio dei fenomeni urbani*, Rome: Officina Edizioni; Canella, Guido. 1965. *Sulle trasformazioni tipologiche degli organismi architettonici*, Milano: Istituto di Composizione Architettonica della Facoltà del Politecnico di Milano; Samonà, Giuseppe. 1975. *L'Unità Architettura – Urbanistica*, Franco Angeli, Milano.

⁴ Cfr. Cuneo, Paolo. 1986. *Storia dell'urbanistica. Il mondo Islamico*, Roma: Laterza; Petruccioli, A. 1985. *Dar Al Islam. Architetture del territorio nei paesi islamici*, Roma: Carucci.

⁵ Grabar, Oleg. 1973, *The formation of Islamic Art*, Yale: Yale University Press; Grube, E. J. 1978, “What is Islamic Architecture?” in A.A.V.V., *Architecture of the Islamic World*, London: Thames and Hudson.

⁶ Cfr. Bianca, Stefano. 2000. *Urban Form in the Arab World*, Zurich: vdf Hochschulverlag AG an der ETH; Creswell, K. A. C. 1958. *A short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd; Petruccioli, Attilio. 2007. *After Amnesia. Learning from the Islamic Mediterranean urban fabric*, Altamura (Bari): Grafica & Stampa.

⁷ Cfr. David, Jean-Claude. 1988. “Production et occupation de l'espace urbain à Alep”, in *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, no.37, pp. 85-93; David, Jean-Claude. 2002. *Alep*, Paris: Editions Flammarion; Neglia, Annalinda Giulia. 2006. *An interpretation of the urban fabric: the structure of pre-Islamic Aleppo*, Bari: PoliBA Press;

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⁸ Canella, Guido. "Ingegneri create nuove forme", in *Conrospazio*, maggio-giugno 1972, pag. 99-100.

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