

OTTOMAN DAMASCUS OF THE 19TH CENTURY ARTISTIC AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT AS AN EXPRESSION OF CHANGING TIMES

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed upon that modernisation in the Middle East is the equivalent of Europeanisation. However, I will try to demonstrate, by analysing two topics, that no direct influence from Europe was active in Damascus at the time of late Ottoman rule. There was instead an *Osmanisation*, in which modernisation developed through Ottoman centralism. First, the construction of a new administrative town-centre was, in itself, a manifestation of Ottoman reformatory intentions. In the 19th century and in the first two decades of this century the construction of a new administrative centre west of the old town was a functional and structural break in the tradition of town settlement in Damascus.¹

On the other hand, we find an *Osmanisation* of the architecture. Artistically, they followed the examples of Istanbul and Anatolia as they had not done in the previous centuries. It is true that we find a similar phenomenon in the 16th century after the Ottoman conquest of Damascus,² but this changed slowly in the following centuries and the climax was reached with the typical Damascene style of the 18th century under the government of the Syrian family al-ʿAzm. This local design of buildings in the 18th century unequivocally differs from the developments of the late 19th century. The adoption of

1. On the urban development of Damascus: S. ATASSI, J.P. PASCAL (ed.), *Damas extra-muros, Middn Sultānī, présentation et analyse des édifices répertoriés*, Damascus, 1994; K. DETTMANN, *Damaskus, Eine orientalische Stadt zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, Erlangen, 1969; A. KREMER, *Topographie von Damaskus, Denkschriften*, Wien, 1854/55; M. KURD ʿĀLĪ, *Ḥiṭat aš-Šām*, Beirut, 1971, Damascus, 1983; A. RAYMOND, *The Great Arab Cities in the 16th-18th Centuries, An Introduction*, 1984 (Arabic: *al-ʿĀwāšim al-ʿArabīya*, Damascus, 1986); A. RIHAWI, *Damascus, its History, Development and Artistic Heritage*, 1977; D. SACK, *Damaskus, Entwicklung und Strukturen einer orientalisches-islamischen Stadt*, Mainz, 1989; J. SAUVAGET, "Esquisse d'une histoire de la ville Damas", *REI* 8, 1934 (1937) p. 422-480; Q. AŠ-ŠIHĀBĪ, *Dimašq, Tārīḥ wa-Šuʿar*, Damascus, 1990; K. WULZINGER, C. WATZINGER, *Damaskus, die islamische Stadt*, Berlin, 1924.

2. M. MEINECKE, "Die osmanische Architektur des 16. Jahrhunderts in Damaskus", *Fifth International Congress of Turkish Art*, 1979, p. 575-595.

Ottoman-shaped structures in the last decades of Ottoman rule in Damascus can be divided into four different stages:

1. The appearance of, as I will call it, the *konak*-style for a new type of public building in the second half of the last century.
2. With the turn of the century, Ottoman interpretations of European buildings as we know it from the Balian family in Istanbul.
3. Direct European planning beginning shortly before 1910 and onwards.
4. This development in public buildings is accompanied by an increasing take-over of Ottoman layout of decor and design in private houses.

II. THE SETTINGS OF THE NEW TOWN-CENTRE

The river Barada runs between the Ottoman quarters al-Qanawāt and Sûq Şarûğa. Here, west of the citadel, there were only a few scattered buildings, especially Mamluk and Ottoman mosques. In the 19th and at the beginning of this century, a completely new administrative centre was built in this area around the Margā-Square, a post and telegraph office, a new kind of *sûq* and trade building, a large boulevard, railway station, central police-station, hotels, *saray*, town-hall, medical centre, theatre, schools, coffee-houses and much more.

However, the effects of the reforms in Damascus, and consequently the new urban development at the town-centre, remained limited until ʿAbdülʿazîz came to power in 1861. This was only interrupted by the reforms at the time of the Egyptian occupation 1832-40. The outset of the development at the Margā-square was a consequence of the massacre of the Christians in 1860, when Damascus was closely bound to Istanbul.³ Under the reign of ʿAbdülʿazîz (1861-1876) and then particularly under ʿAbdülḥamîd II (1876-1909) and the Young Turks (1908-18) Damascus was subject to Ottoman reforms.⁴ In particular, ʿAbdülḥamîd tried to centralize the government and to reduce the semi-autonomous structures. These far-reaching changes are represented by the construction of numerous administrative buildings. They not only functionally, but also symbolically characterized the connection of the capital of the province to the main capital, Istanbul. The new buildings expressed this connection in a language of a form new to Damascus.

To understand what is new let us have a look first at a traditional house. The Damascene house in the 18th century is a yard-house. Public as well as private buildings — except for mosques and *madrasas* were not free-standing and did

3. Concerning the failure of the first Tanzîmât-steps in Damascus between 1840 and 1860 and role of the 1860 riots: L. SCHATKOWSKI SCHILCHER, *Families in Politics*, Stuttgart, 1985, p. 50-59, 87-106.

4. Concerning the Tanzîmât and afterwards: A. ʿAWAD, *al-Idāra al-ʿUṣṣmānīya fī Wilāyat Sāriya 1864-1914*, Cairo, 1969; M. MOʿAZ, *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine 1840-1861*, Oxford, 1968; A. RĀFEQ, *al-ʿArab wa-l-ʿUṣṣmānīyūn, 1516-1916*, Damascus, 1993; L. SCHATKOWSKI SCHILCHER, *ibid.*; S. SHAW, E. KURAL SHAW, *History of the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, 1985.

not face onto the street. Generally we find no, or only rudimentary special arrangements of the façade. The façade itself is a chalk-painted white wall without or with only few windows. A small part of the house may protrude with oriels into the street, without concern for symmetry and the building is covered by a flat roof.

III. THE *Konak* STYLE

Around 1878 the main court (*al-ʿAdalīya*) and in 1882 the post- and telegraph office (*al-Barīd wa-l-Barg*) were constructed on the northern front of the Marḡa-Square (fig. 2). It is of particular interest that the above mentioned buildings no longer represented the tradition of Damascene house-forms. A style of building was now imported whose outer features resembles Anatolian *konaks* in a striking way.⁵ The techniques remained the same: a stone-built ground floor and a second floor made of a wooden framework filled with loam bricks, plastered and painted white. But the outlook changed. The façades of the new buildings in Damascus — like the façades of contemporary Anatolian *konaks* — are clearly divided by elongated rectangular and evenly distributed windows. In the first storey an oriel begins and structures the building. They are covered by a slightly sloping roof with a protruding roof ledge. Compared to the traditional Damascene house not only is the now outward-facing façade of the free standing building quite different, but the ground-plan as well. The yard is smaller or may not exist at all. This new design for Damascus has nothing in common with the Damascene yard-house-architecture. This model of an Anatolian house was adopted in the second part of the 19th century in the whole of Damascus. The internal arrangement of the Anatolian *konak* with the sofa was not always adopted, but at least the outer-façade was clearly copied from Anatolia. Many of the private buildings also adopted this *konak*-façade-model. On the other hand in the old town, the traditional arrangement was mostly kept. But new forms appeared in its decoration and design making it plain that we are not only dealing with the capriciousness of Ottoman governors but with a *zeitgeist* which entered deeply into the private life.

IV. PRIVATE BUILDINGS AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE *zeitgeist* (fig. 3-4)

Traditionally the yard-façade of a Damascene house is characterized by *ablaq*-stripes.⁶ This is broken by the decor-fields and borders, which are set

5. G. GOODWIN, *A history of Ottoman Architecture*, London, 1971, p. 432, figure 483 or p. 435, figure 489. Numerous examples in S.H. ELDEM, *Türk evi osmanlı Dönemi*, Vol. 3, 1987.

6. Concerning the Damascene house: M.S. BRIGGS, "The Saracenic House", *Burlington Magazine* 38 (1921), p. 228-238, 289-301; D. DUDA, *Innenarchitektur syrischer Stadthäuser des 16-18. Jahrhunderts*, Beirut, 1971; G. ROBINE, *Palais et demeures de Damas au 18^{ème} siècle* (french/arab.), Damascus, 1990; D. SACK, *op. cit.* [n. 1], p. 70ff; K. SİRJAB, *Das arabische Wohnhaus des 17. bis 19. Jahrhunderts in Syrien*, Aachen, 1965.

apart by kaleidoscopic colour paste decoration. The predominant arch-form is the low-rounded arch. The ornamentation of the wall is confined to a third or a half of its height. The rest of the wall remains white. The *Qā'a* (*Qaşr*; fig. 3) stands higher and is divided into a lower part — the so called *'ataba* — and one to three upper parts — the *maṣṭaba* or *tazar*. The *'ataba* is close to the entrance and often comprises a fountain and a high ceiling. A *maṣṭaba* originally contained cushions and *divans* instead of furniture. The design of the inner façade differs from the outer façade only by a richer ornamentation or a special lacquered woodwork.⁷

Private houses of the late 19th century and of the beginning of this century differ unequivocally from their predecessors (fig. 4). *Ablaq* and colour-paste-decoration play only a minor role or are missing. The masonry is mostly plastered or covered with stucco or plain stone-masonry. They contain eclectic hitherto unknown elements of the Baroque, Rococo and Classicism, which are interpretations of the building and decorative forms that prevailed in Istanbul. Façades are now literally perforated by windows of various dimensions, while the window-arches are exclusively well rounded. The *Qā'a*, now often called *Şâlîya*, is a regular big hall at ground level equipped with European-style furniture. The walls are now decorated to the roof by the previously mentioned new elements of decor. Moreover, wall-paintings appear, as we find them in the same type and same place nearly everywhere in the Ottoman Empire.⁸ Images of the Bosphorus which cover the upper part of the interior walls of the room are new in Damascus.

The adoption of this arrangement and this motif is an intentional orientation towards Istanbul, the capital of the empire. This fact is clearly shown in the beginning of the French Mandate (1920-1946). With the shift of the political centre to France the motif is changing too. Instead of the Bosphorus we find for example in the *Bayt Fahrî al-Bârûdî* different images of Paris. This indicates that under the late Ottomans we are dealing with an explicit take-over of central-Ottoman elements of art. The exterior and interior design of the above briefly described houses are, not without reason, still called *İstânbulî* ("from Istanbul" or "in the manner of Istanbul").

Of course it is difficult to distinguish between what is "European" and "Ottoman". This effect is produced by two parallel evolutions. On one hand, the European style is reproduced in Istanbul, on the other hand Ottoman styles are simultaneously adopted in Damascus. The interpretations of European art emerge in the capital as a new style. It is this new style which reaches Damascus. Ottoman interpretations of European art are appropriated enti-

7. Concerning the lacquered woodwork: D. DUDA, "Painted and Lacquered Woodwork in Arab Houses of Damascus and Aleppo" in Watson (ed.), *Lacquerwork in Asia and Beyond*, London, 1981; T. THUNSCHE, "Ein Damaszener Interieur aus dem 18. Jahrhundert", *Brenties* (ed.), *Orientalia in den Museen der DDR*, 1987, p. 13-22.

8. Concerning the wall-paintings: G. RENDA, "Wall Painting in Turkish Houses", *Fifth International Congress of Turkish Art*, Budapest, 1978, p. 711-735; R. ARIK, "Camide Resim...", *Türkiyemiz* 14 (Ekim 1974), p. 2-9.

rely in Damascus and the buildings approach more and more the European archetype. This process can be seen by the further development at the Marğa-Square.

V. FROM OTTOMAN INTERPRETATIONS OF EUROPEAN ART TO DIRECT EUROPEAN PLANNING

Contrary to what we noted before, with the erection of *konak*-like public buildings at the Marğa-Square, around the turn of the century we now see administrative buildings which are strikingly linked to Ottoman interpretations of European art. Buildings like the town-hall (*Dâr al-Baladîya*, 1894; fig. 1), the police-headquarters (*Dâ'irat aš-Šurṭa*, c. 1900; fig. 5) and the New Saray (*as-Sarâyyâ al-Ġadîda*, 1900; fig. 6) are free-standing stone-complexes in an almost pure neo-classic style. Nothing more is visible of Damascene design and techniques of construction. Doubtless, the Tanzîmât-buildings in Istanbul — for example these of the Balian Family — were prototypes for the plans in Damascus. The Damascene Baladîye or the police-headquarters seems to be an exact cut-out of the front façade of the Imperial War Academy in Istanbul, which was erected by Garabed Amira Balian in 1835 (fig. 7). Also the conception of the police station in Maçka (1861-62), the Maçka Armoury (1861-62), the Mecidiye Barracks (1863-64) or even the Kalender Kasır (1864) are recalled in the new Damascene administrative buildings.⁹ In Istanbul, we see the same elements of neo-classicism, which arrive a few years later in Damascus. Of course, this style is also understood as European and hence modern, but the influence from Europe to Damascus evidently passes through the Bosphorus and finds its modifications there. The new buildings express in a modern language of forms the new kind of politics and the Ottoman claim to be a modern, centralised state. To show this pretension, a new architectural element is introduced: the memorial-column. The erection of a bronze-column in 1905 as a memorial commemorating the telegraph connection Istanbul-Damascus-Mekka is a sign of Ottoman presence similar to the Takîya Sulaymânîya of Sinan 350 years earlier (fig. 2). A strong symbol on top of the column is the model of the Istanbul Hamidiye Camii (1886) where 'Abdülhamîd celebrated his *Selamlık*. The construction of the telegraph-column is the first obvious evidence of a European architect, Raimondo D'Aronco (1857-1932), the court-architect of the sultan.¹⁰ Now, in the last years of Sultân 'Abdülhamîd and under the Young Turks direct European planning begins.

Under the Spanish architect Fernando de Aranda (1878-1969) in 1910 the modern trade-building *al-Ġâbid* is built at the Marğa-Square.¹¹ This building

9. See for the Mekteb-i Ulum-u Harbîye-i Erhane: P. TUĞLACI, *The Role of the Balian Family in Ottoman Architecture*, Istanbul, 1990, p. 268 and the other buildings p. 663, 537, 665, 527.

10. Concerning D'Aronco: D. BARILLARI, *Raimondo D'Aronco*, Roma-Bari, 1995.

11. Concerning de Aranda: E.G. GASCÓN, "El arquitecto español Fernando de Aranda (1878-1969) en Damasco", *Awraq, Estudios sobre el Mundo árabe e islâmico contemporáneo* 9 (1988), p. 67-100.

based on direct European planning adopts all functions of a traditional *ḥaṇ*. Yet the ʿÂbid-building is no longer an Ottoman interpretation of European art but a direct manifestation of European planning. This is a marked turning-point in the history of Damascene architecture. My argument is clearly confirmed by the final jewel of 400 years of Ottoman building history in Damascus, the Ḥiğâz railway station (fig. 8). The Ḥiğâz railway station, built between 1908 and 1913 by the same Spanish architect, is an anticipation of the orientalizing colonial-style. The heretofore discussed principle "Ottoman interpretation of European art" is turned around. The Ḥiğâz railway station is an European interpretation of oriental art. From now on we can talk about a europeanization of the Damascene townscape.

VI. FINAL REFLECTION

In the 19th century the Ottomans bestow a new style of art and a new dimension of urban development on Damascus. As a product of Ottoman centralisation, by closely binding the province to the capital and by reducing all semi-autonomous structures, together with real reforms of modernisation, the townscape changed. The dynamic development at the Marğa-Square prevents a modernisation of the old town centre. *Extra muros*, the Ottoman city constitutes a modern centre, which takes over nearly all functions of the old town centre. This development causes a dualism, which is a reason for many of the structural problems of today. On the other hand, the old town centre is not destroyed by modernisation and cultural heritage is maintained. An evaluation of this process is not easy. Yet it is a fact that around the Marğa-Square the intentions of true reform and modernisation of urban structures are manifested and these intentions find their expression in Ottoman imperial art.



FIG. 1. Marğa Square: town-hall (*Dâr al-Baladîya*).

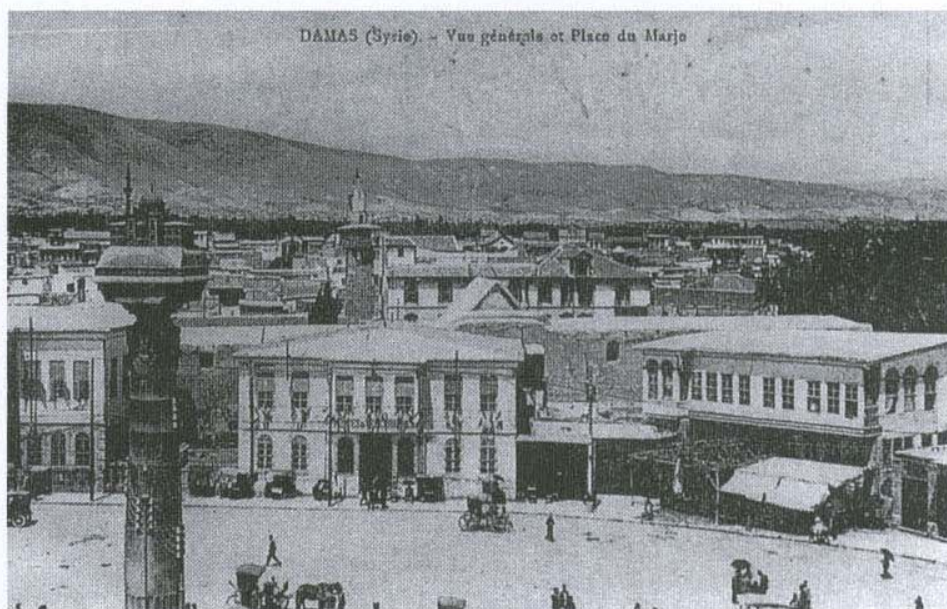


FIG. 2. Marğa-square: main court (*al-Adliya*, far left), telegraph-memorial and post- and telegraph office (*al-Barid wa-l-Barq*).

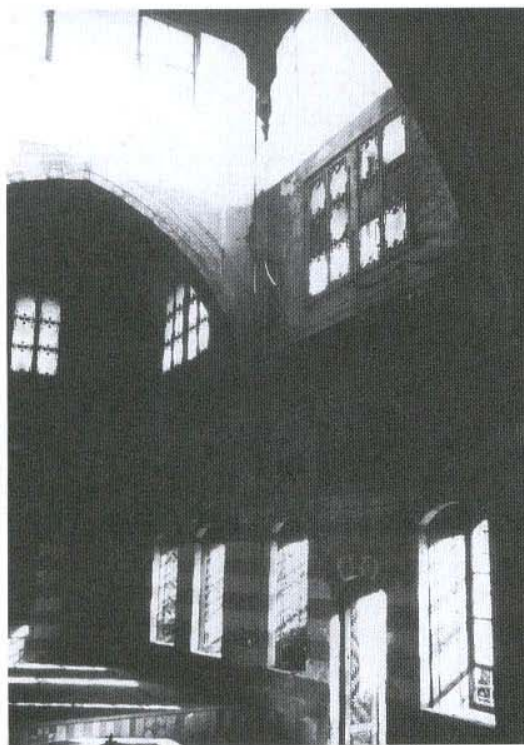


FIG. 3. Bayt al-Ğabrî, *Qa'a*, second half of the 18th century (*Qa'a*-woodwork dated 1156/1743-4 and 1157/1744-5).



FIG. 4. Bayt Yûsuf Afandî al-ʿAnbar, *Qa'a* of the *Haramlık*, 1867-1888.



FIG. 5. Central police-station (*Dâ'irat as-Şurṭa*).

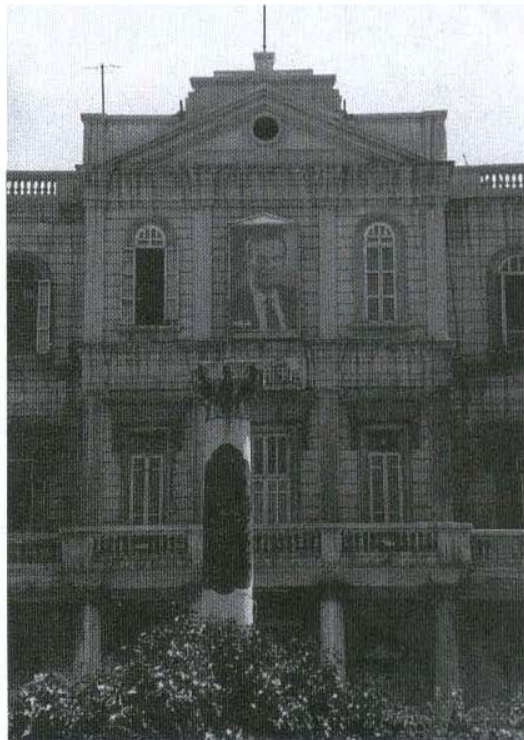


FIG. 6. Saray (*as-Sardyyâ al-Ġadîda*).



FIG. 7. War Academy in Istanbul (P. Tuğlacı, 1990, p. 268).

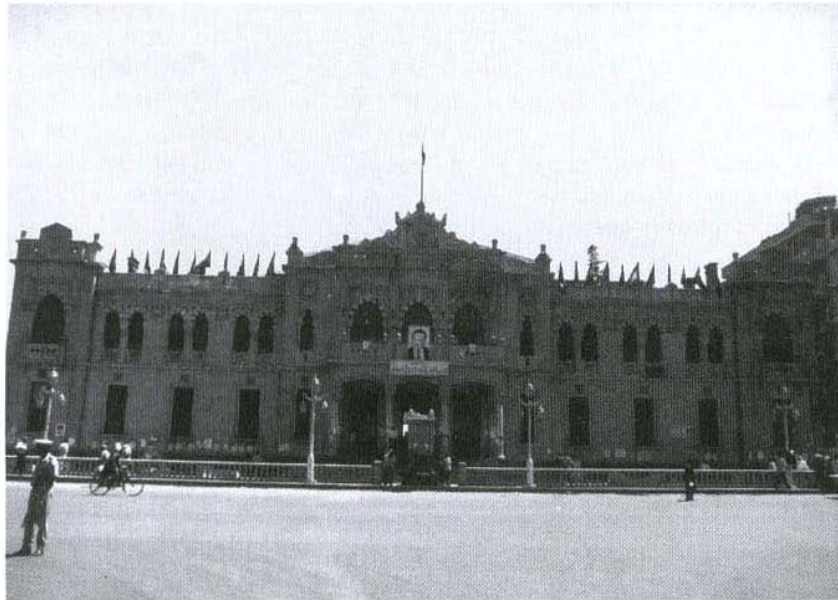


FIG. 8. Hıgâz railway station.