



DAMASCENE DERELICTION

An architectural study trip to Syria shortly before the Arab Spring took hold revealed the Old Town of Damascus to be long-abandoned and lamentably neglected.

A year on, this precious heritage continues to deteriorate unregarded amid escalating violence and crisis

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It is said that the Prophet Mohammad refused to enter the gates of Damascus. He ascended the mountain track which led all travellers to the city, but when the view emerged of the glistening, lush oasis of Damascus he continued past, proclaiming 'man should only enter Paradise once'. The mythical status of Damascus as the oldest continually inhabited city has persisted through its existence; as described by Mark Twain, 'she measures time not by days, months and years, but by the empires she has seen rise and prosper and crumble to ruin. She is a type of immortality.' Visiting Damascus in January 2011, only weeks before the Arab Spring spread to Syria, this sense of the passage of time within the old city walls was tangible. The scattered columns of the Temple

of Jupiter, which can now be spotted as lintels along the route of the ruined *peribolos*, and the reinstated Roman arch, found when excavating Straight Street, are two examples of Damascene history that illustrate this layered narrative in the urban fabric of the city.

Despite the mixed historic fabric, the domestic architecture of the Old Town is dominated by the period of Ottoman rule. From occupation in 1516 until the time of the French Mandate in the early 20th century, Damascus grew vastly. The city became the entrepôt of the Hajj to Mecca, bringing copious trade and concomitant wealth. Building spread particularly along the caravan route of the pilgrims and clustered close to the religious centre of the Umayyad Mosque. With this wealth there was

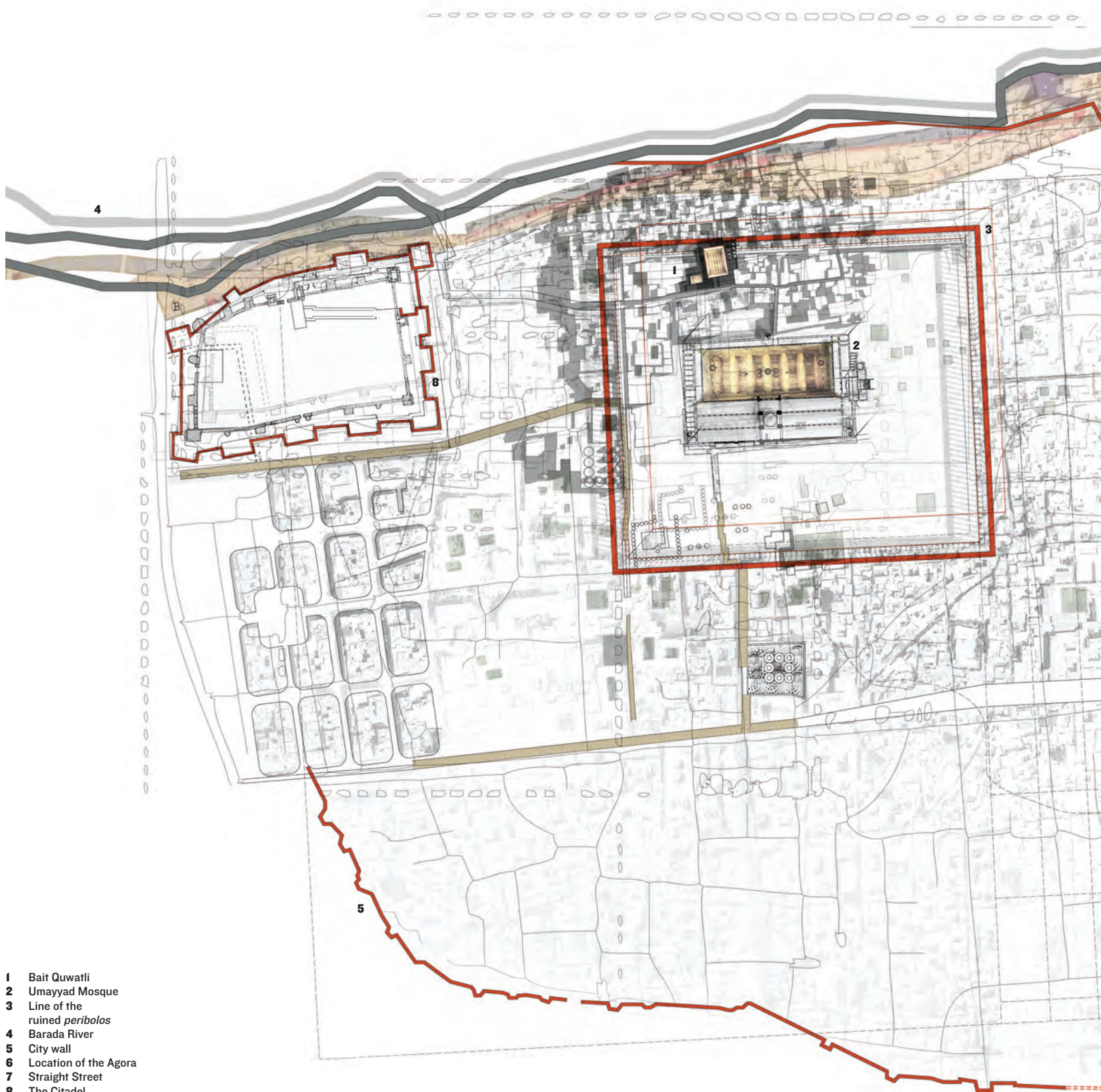
competition to construct *bait*s (lavish courtyard homes) as symbols of power.

Some 16,000 homes ranging from small houses to extravagant palaces were recorded at the end of the empire in the Ottoman yearbook of 1900. More than half of these houses no longer exist. Of the ones that remain, several have had their delicate decoration hastily covered with a sad attempt at reproduction; others have been painstakingly revived; more still have been abandoned to crumble and ruin.

The reason for the Ottoman home's demise is conveyed in the plan of the Old Town. Open public space is limited; instead the city fabric is inverted within the home into the private space of the inner courtyards. Dense and cramped, the restricted network of alleyways and inward looking

homes are unsuitable for modern demands. In the 1960s, a new generation of Damascene children were looking for independence from traditional inter-generational living. This coincided with a desire for space and the convenience of being able to drive a car to your door. En masse people moved to new high-rise apartments in the suburbs, thus emptying the Old Town of residential life. After this exodus, the elite of Damascus grew to regard the Old Town as a slum. Most of the houses have never been reoccupied because of the stigma attached to the area.

Bait Quwatli is one such house, whose simple walls conceal a richly interwoven inner world. Unlike the majority of the Ottoman courtyard homes, whose families rose through religious or military power, the name of



- 1 Bait Quwatli
- 2 Umayyad Mosque
- 3 Line of the ruined *peribolos*
- 4 Barada River
- 5 City wall
- 6 Location of the Agora
- 7 Straight Street
- 8 The Citadel

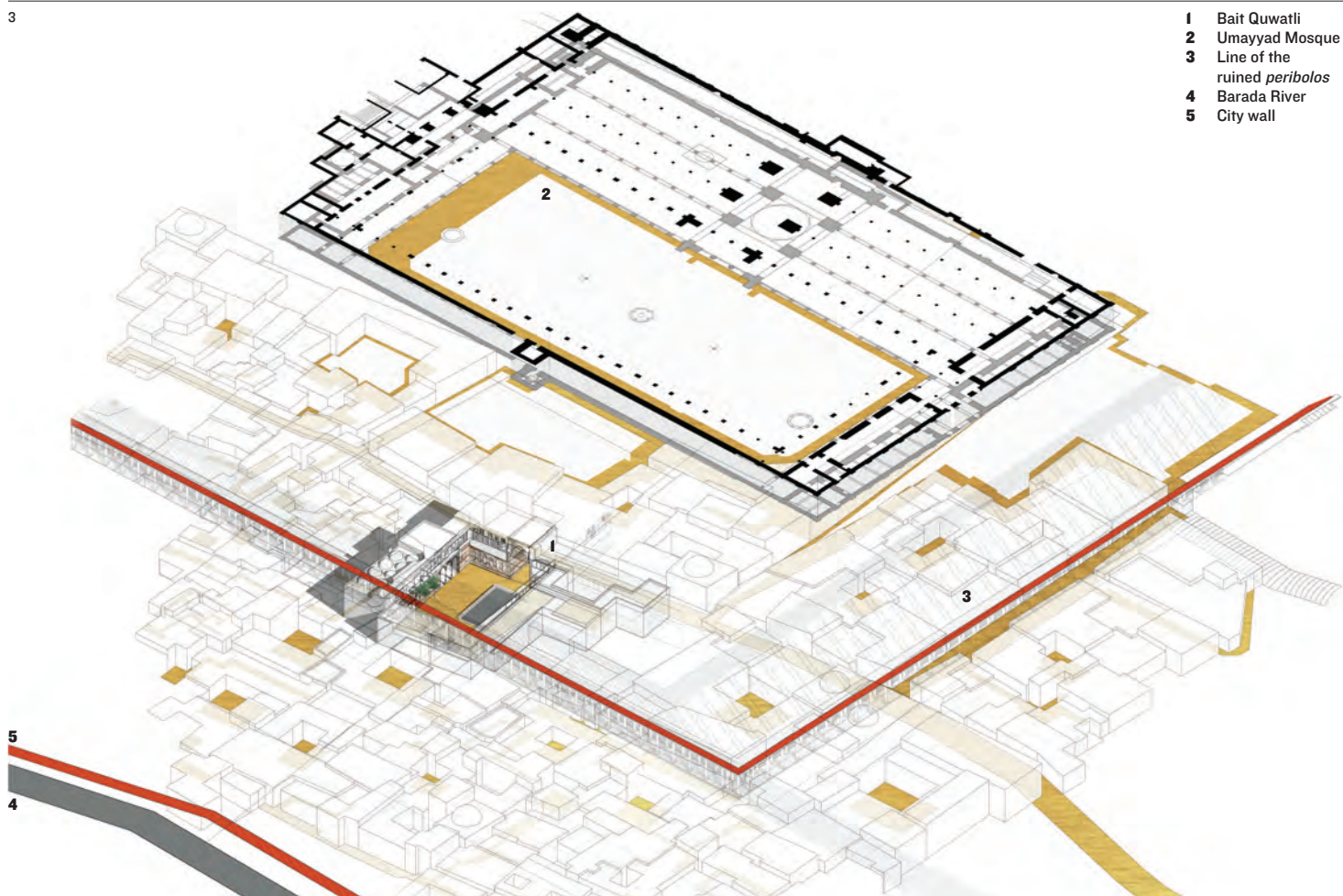


Quwatli ascended through trade. Ultimately there were four homes that bore the name of Quwatli within the city walls, but this was the largest. Thought to have been built nearly 200 years ago at the height of Ottoman rule in Damascus, the *bait* once housed the first British Consulate, but is now empty. Bait Quwatli is a prime example of the need to safeguard the city's historic architectural wealth.

To be close to the religious centre and the city's major trading points, Quwatli built his family home just to the north of the great Umayyad Mosque; sandwiched between where the Roman *peribolos* to the south and the city wall to the north once stood. Like most Damascene courtyard homes which articulate a culture of external modesty and internal display, the house has little outward expression. Instead the austere, windowless facade blends in with its surroundings. It is impossible not only to recognise the status of the house within, but also to distinguish the boundary between this house and its neighbours. However, once entering the front door and crossing a blank white hall into

1. (Previous page) view to the east across the crumbling roof and courtyard of Bait Quwatli
2. Plan of the Old Town of Damascus. Bait Quwatli sits immediately to the north of the Umayyad Mosque, along the line where the Roman *peribolos* once stood

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- 5 City wall

the main courtyard, you are enveloped in texture.

The house and courtyard are enormous, more akin to a palace than a house, with every surface covered in pattern and colour. Stripes of orange, cream and basalt black work their way up the facade, detailed with gypsum ornamentation that shrouds doorways and windows. Much of the decoration is coloured plasterwork, where tinted pastes replicate geometric patterned mosaic.

The spatial form of the courtyard homes catered for the extremes in the Syrian climate. During the winter months, life was played out on the upper floors, the lush reams of carpet and richly decorated wooden panelling insulated from the cold. During the hot summer months, the courtyard became

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an extension of the home, where the shady ground floor rooms opened up to the exterior. Central to this courtyard sits a fountain, where in the arid climes of Syria an abundance of water is synonymous with wealth. As with all palace courtyards, the fountain at Bait Quwatli is positioned in line with the great arched *liwan*, a double-height room which is fully exposed to the exterior.

Leading off the *liwan* through an inconspicuous door is the main reception room for public use. The room holds the most astonishing mix of decoration in the house. Spreading down from the patterned poplar beams, which slump and crack, moments from collapse, are murals depicting fashionable landscapes of the Ottoman Empire. Split into two spaces by an archway, the

walls of the room are punctured by high circular windows, which on the facade are curiously disguised within rectangular frames. Beneath the paintings and oculi, elaborate panelling of gypsum and lacquerwork in gold and now muted pinks, blues and greens create texture and ornate niches that mimic the form of mosque mihrabs, adding further depth to the walls. The floor is thick with dust that was once plasterwork and ornament.

One cause of the extent and speed of ruination can be found in the construction techniques. The ground floors and cellars were commonly built of striped basalt and limestone, a method known as *ablaq*, brought to Syria from Cairo after the construction of the Mosque of al-Zahir Baybars, also known as the Qasr Ablaq Palace, during the 12th century.

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3. Isometric view from the Old Town wall towards the Umayyad Mosque.

The city fabric is inverted within the home into the private space of the inner courtyards

4. Stripes of orange, cream and basalt black work their way up the facade, detailed with gypsum ornamentation that shrouds doorways and windows

5. The arched *liwan* provides a shaded exterior room off the courtyard for escape from the searing heat

6. *Liwan* courtyard elevation. Rectangular window frames conceal the circular form of the oculi within

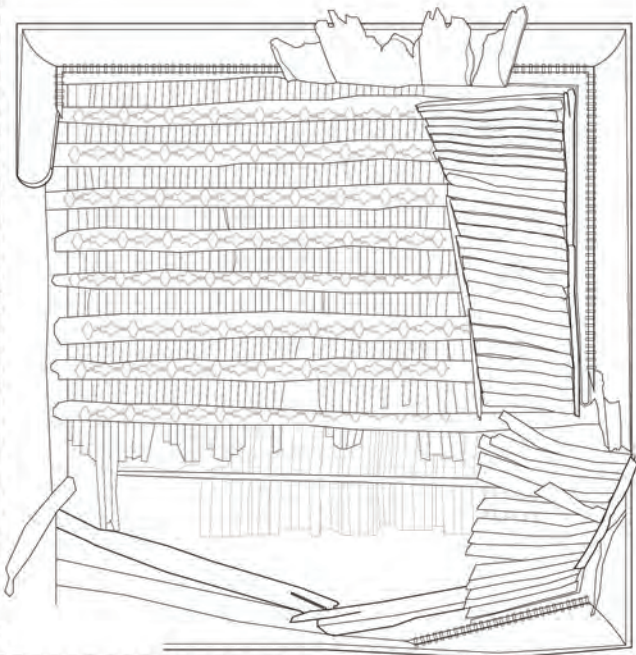
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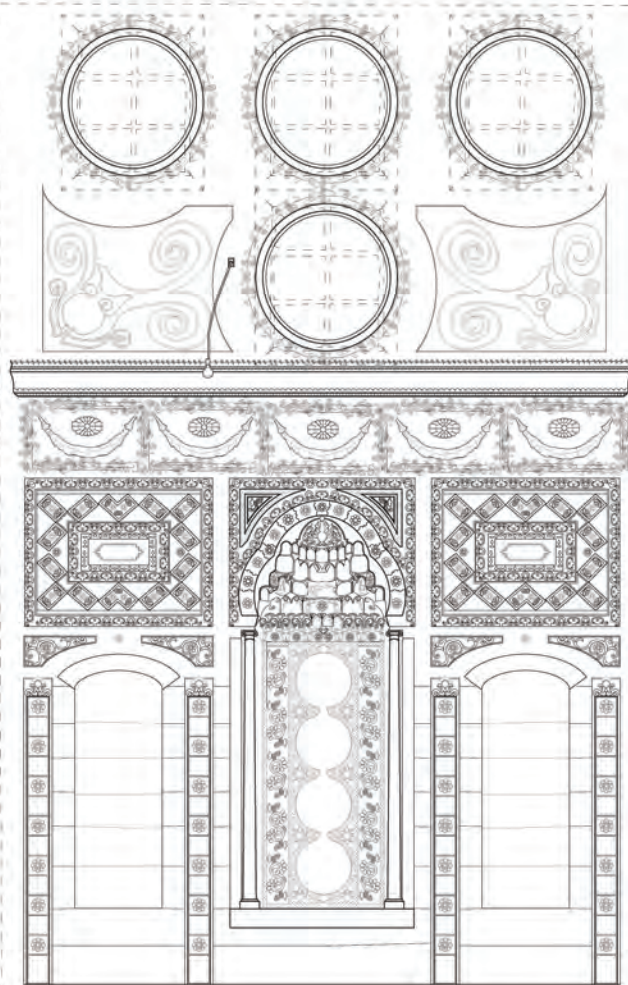
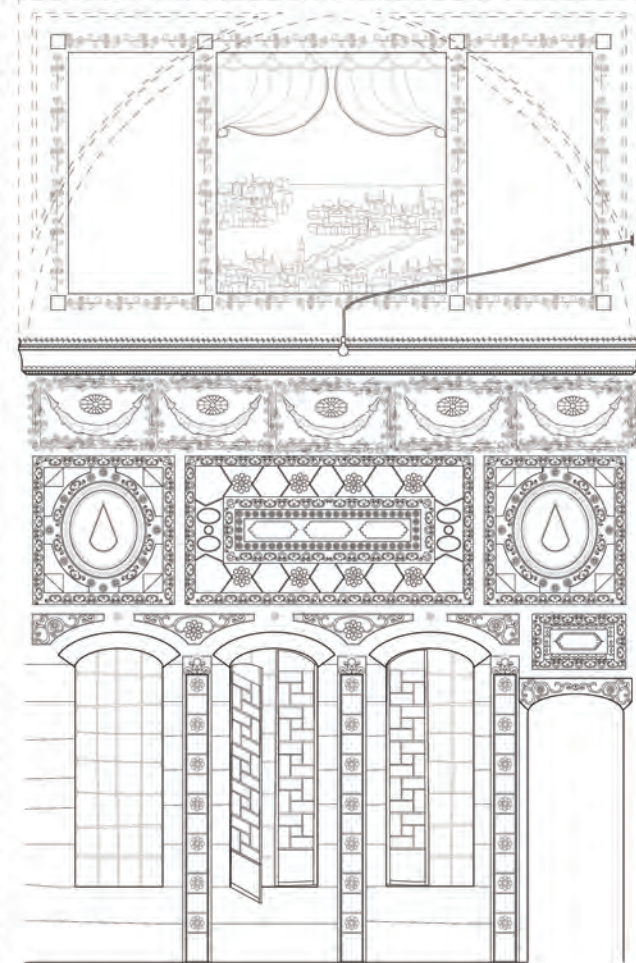
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7. Interior elevations and ceiling plan of the public reception room

8. Detail of the faded decorative panelling

9. The deterioration of the roof is causing the ceilings to slump and crack into the room below, revealing the layers of construction and exposing the fragile interior ornamentation to the elements

10. Poplar beams are finely painted in muted greens and pinks

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However, the upper floors and roofs were constructed of layers of poplar, dried mud and straw bricks, packed in with more mud and a final skim of lime plaster. The fast, but temporary building materials created an adaptable living space; the home could easily grow or shrink to accommodate the size of family or changing styles. Over their years in use, many of the house footprints remained the same, but the layout above might change with each occupant.

This temporary nature required constant maintenance to prevent decomposition. Decades without a steady owner's care have left the mud and poplar walls and ceilings vulnerable to decay. This is particularly apparent in the roof of Bait Quwatli where an undulating wave dips and swells along the

roofline as the water drenched mud roofs sag into the rooms beneath. The progressive exterior deterioration has led many of the ceilings to collapse, destroying the finely painted poplar beams and exposing the fragile interior ornamentation to the elements.

There appear to be two opposing attitudes to the restoration of the Ottoman palaces in the Old Town. The approach found in many of the boutique hotels in Damascus is to pick one period in the *bait's* history, and to renovate and strip back the building to that point. This leads, however, to a somewhat flat, lifeless experience.

Inspiration can instead be taken from the recent revival of Bait al-Aqqad, as the Danish Institute in Damascus. The highly sympathetic restoration

has taken account of different periods, thus revealing history, story and decay in the building fabric. The delight of these palaces is conjured in the imagination, evoking narrative and an abstract memory of the house. Vital to the experience of Bait Quwatli is a child-like excitement of being 'the intrepid explorer'; you feel as though you are the first to encounter its decayed state. There at just the right moment, teetering before collapse – between its life and end.

It is a struggle to marry an almost naively romantic impression of a fleeting visit to these palaces last January with the stark reality of the shaky hand camera footage of the city today. The streets of Damascus have witnessed intense violence

and oppression and in this moment, the plight of these houses seems remote from the fight for survival and freedom of the Syrian people.

Seamus Heaney in *The Government of the Tongue*, when reflecting on the arts during times of crisis, found it difficult to avoid the 'feeling that song constituted a betrayal of suffering'. Despite these reservations, Heaney maintained the necessity for poetry in a society that is collapsing around you; there is still a place to speak out for beauty, in defence of this built poetry. Amid the violence, the old courtyard homes still stand, but their condition is precarious. Many of these fragile Ottoman wonders are teetering on the brink of complete ruin.

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