


Article

Urban Identity in Transition: A Metropolitan Analysis of Damascus

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Abstract: Facing substantial challenges due to rapid urbanization and socio-political shifts, the urban identities of our cities are in a state of significant transformation. This study explored the dynamic evolution of Damascus's urban identity over distinct historical periods, employing a multi-dimensional methodology, which integrated spatial assessments, observational data from urban planners, and historical analyses. The findings revealed a transition from a stable urban identity in the pre-colonial period, to fragmented and, eventually, lost states in the post-colonial era. This study has underscored the need for strategic interventions to preserve the city's identity amidst modernization pressures, providing valuable insights for urban planners and policymakers. The findings underscore the pressing need for strategic, context-sensitive interventions that can restore and revitalize Damascus's unique urban identity, contributing to a broader discourse on the sustainable preservation of the cultural heritage in historic cities facing modernization pressures.

Keywords: urban identity; urban transformation; identity transitions; cultural heritage; Damascus city



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1. Introduction

Urban identity is a critical facet of a city's character, influencing both its physical environment and the socio-cultural dynamics of its inhabitants [1–4]. It is a dynamic construction, which evolves with the passage of time and is influenced by a myriad of factors, including globalization, urban planning, and demographic shifts [5,6]. In contexts experiencing rapid urbanization and socio-political shifts, transformations in urban identity become especially pronounced, affecting how residents perceive and interact with their cityscape [7–9]. Urban identity, as examined in this study, differs from related concepts, such as place image and place reputation. While urban identity encompasses the intrinsic social, cultural, and architectural characteristics of a city, place image often refers to how a city is perceived externally, and place reputation refers to the collective assessment of a city's qualities and value [10,11]. This study adopted this distinction to focus specifically on the characteristics of Damascus's urban identity, with an emphasis on its socio-cultural evolution over time. While a substantial amount of research has explored these phenomena in rapidly changing cities, such as Cairo and Beirut [12–14], there is a conspicuous gap in the literature concerning Damascus.

Damascus, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities globally, has undergone significant urban expansion and socio-political upheavals in recent decades [14,15]. Despite its rich historical and cultural heritage, comprehensive studies analyzing the transformations of its urban identity are notably scarce. The existing literature often focuses on historical or architectural aspects [16], but seldom addresses the contemporary socio-political factors influencing urban identity. This lack of research limits our understanding of how modern developments and socio-political dynamics impact the city's identity and the lived experiences of its residents.

This study aimed to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of urban identity transformations in Damascus, within the context of rapid urbanization and socio-political change. Employing an innovative analytical framework, which integrated a spatial analysis and socio-cultural perspectives, this research examined the interplay between the physical urban changes and the socio-political factors shaping the city's identity. This framework not only offered a nuanced exploration of Damascus's urban identity, but it can also contribute theoretically by filling a need for a model that is applicable to other cities in similar contexts [17,18].

By focusing on Damascus, this study offered unique insights into urban identity transformations in a setting that has been largely overlooked in scholarly discourse. The findings have significant implications for urban planners, policymakers, and researchers interested in the complexities of urban identity in rapidly changing environments [3–9]. Ultimately, this research enhances our theoretical understanding and provides practical guidance for managing urban identity transformations amid rapid urbanization and socio-political shifts.

2. Materials and Methods

This research employed [19] (Mansour et al., 2023) multi-dimensional approach to assess the urban identity of Damascus across three distinct historical periods. This approach proposed dividing the urban identity analysis into several levels according to the scale, the observer, and the time. Four observer categories—urban planners, native residents, non-native residents, and tourists—were selected to reflect diverse perspectives in this methodology. These observer categories can capture various facets of Damascus's urban landscape across distinct scales. Urban planners contributed structured insights based on spatial coherence and urban policy, while native residents provided lived experiences, which embodied the city's cultural essence. Non-native residents and tourists offered external perspectives, which contrasted with insider views, thus enabling a holistic analysis of urban identity through an enriched cognitive mapping approach. Therefore, we chose the observer of this study to be an urban planner. Regarding the scale, we chose the study scale to be the metropolitan scale, and our study case was the Greater City of Damascus. As for the time periods, they were determined based on the historical development of the city of Damascus. Three time periods were proposed, which represent milestones in the history of the urban development of the city, as follows:

1. Damascus until 1929, which included the historical period from the formation of Damascus until the end of the Ottoman influence on the urban form of the city.
2. Damascus between 1929–1968, which included the historical period between the end of the Ottoman influence and the formation of the first general plan for the city at the hands of the French urban planner, Ecochard.
3. Damascus between 1968–2010, which included the historical period between the placement of the first general urban plan of the city and the last expansion of the city before the beginning of the war in Syria.

The methodology combined qualitative and quantitative data to provide a holistic understanding of the city's identity evolution. This integration ensured a comprehensive analysis of both the tangible and intangible aspects influencing Damascus's urban identity.

2.1. Data Description

The data used in this study were divided into two main types: qualitative and quantitative. The data types, sources, and attributes are summarized in Table 1.

Qualitative data: These included archival documents, historical texts, urban planning documents, and interviews with urban planners. These qualitative sources provided contextual insights into the socio-cultural influences on Damascus's urban fabric over time. Key sources included the National Archives in Damascus and international collections focusing on Middle Eastern urban history.

Quantitative data: Geospatial data, cadastral maps, and population statistics constituted the quantitative dataset. These data, sourced from GIS records and municipal planning departments, allowed for a measurable analysis of urban growth, land use changes, and architectural transformations. Spatial data attributes included land use types, urban sprawl metrics, and population density variations across time periods.

Table 1. Data description.

Data Type	Data Source	Data Attributes
Qualitative	Archival documents, interviews, historical contextualization, and site visits	Socio-cultural context and historical development
Quantitative	GIS data, cadastral maps, population stats, and photographic documentation	Land use, urban expansion, and population density

2.2. Methodological Framework

To assess Damascus's urban identity, this research applied a structured methodological framework, with specific analytical steps, focusing on both material and immaterial aspects of identity. The following were the key methods used, detailed to ensure reproducibility and clarity:

- (a) **Archival research:** Extensive archival research was conducted to gather historical data, urban plans, and photographs. These documents were analyzed to contextualize the city's historical urban forms and its socio-cultural environment across different eras.
- (b) **Historical contextualization:** Each time period was contextualized within its political, social, and cultural framework. This process was crucial for understanding the influences shaping Damascus's urban identity and involved evaluating shifts in urban policy, socio-economic structures, and architectural trends over time.
- (c) **Field surveys and site visits:** Field surveys were conducted in key neighborhoods, supplemented by comprehensive site visits. These visits focused on areas experiencing significant changes or preserving historical features, providing first-hand observation data to cross-reference with archival findings.
- (d) **Photographic documentation:** Photographs of the current urban landscape and significant landmarks were captured to enable a comparative analysis with historical images, aiding in identifying physical transformations over time.
- (e) **Geospatial analysis:** This study employed geographic information systems (GIS) to analyze spatial data. The following specific geospatial analysis techniques were used:

Mapping and layer analysis: spatial data from each historical period were layered using GIS to visualize urban expansion and identify patterns in land use, architectural styles, and morphological changes.

Spatial comparison metrics: To quantify spatial transformations, metrics such as land use change rates and density variations were calculated. Formulas employed in GIS included:

$$\text{Change Rate} = \frac{\text{Current Area} - \text{Previous Area}}{\text{previous Area}} \times 100$$

- (f) **Content analysis** of local media: Local news articles, blogs, and social media content were analyzed to understand public perception and discourse on changes in urban identity over time. This analysis provided an additional layer of context, revealing contemporary attitudes towards urban transformation in Damascus.

The methodology outlined provided a comprehensive framework for assessing the urban identity of Damascus. It combined historical research with modern analytical techniques, offering a multi-faceted view of the city's evolution. This approach not only aided in understanding the past and present urban fabric of Damascus, but will also inform future urban planning and conservation efforts. Figure 1 illustrates the data collection, analytical steps, and study outputs involved in assessing the urban identity of Damascus.

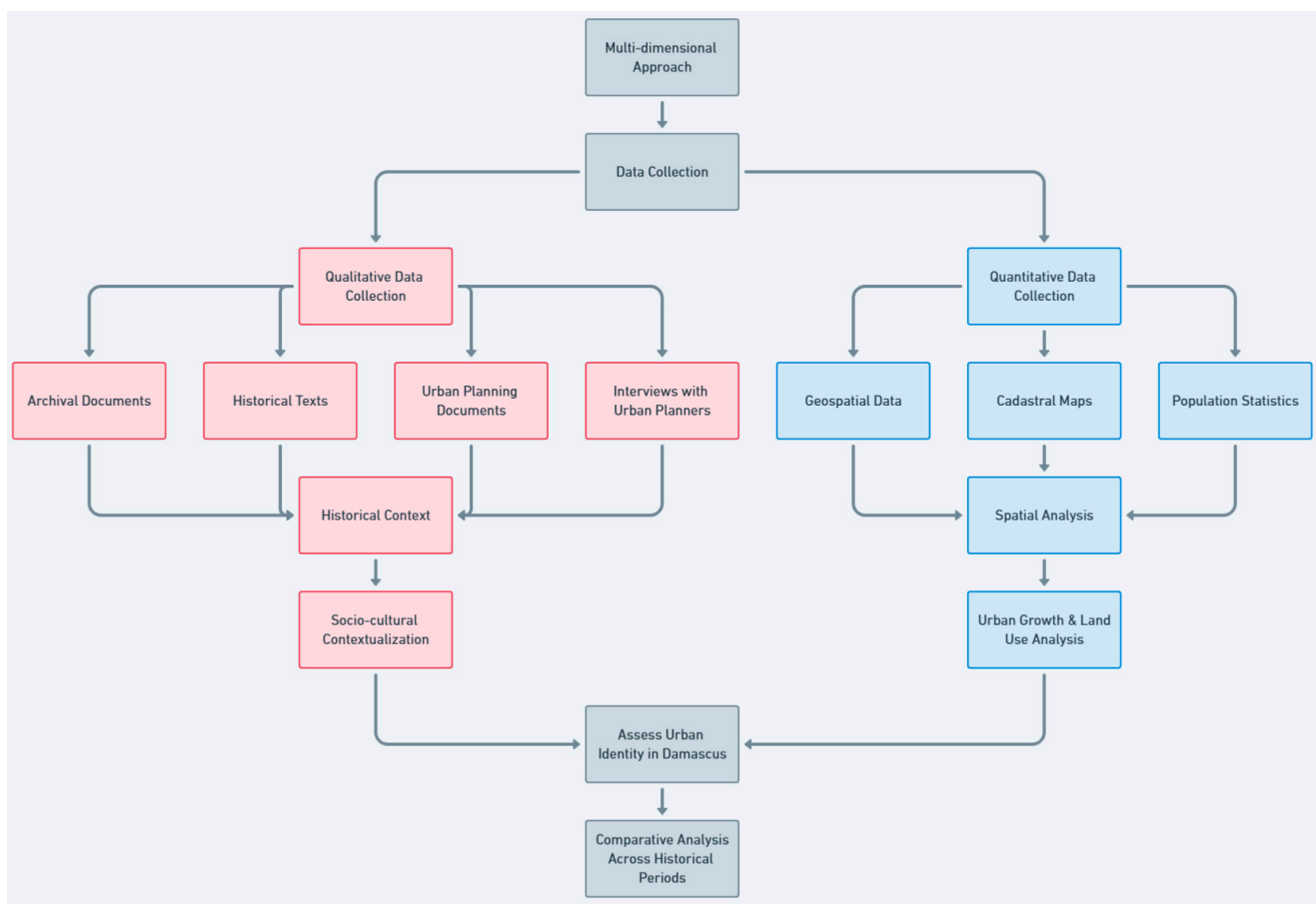


Figure 1. Research framework diagram.

3. Case Study: The Assessment of Urban Identity in Damascus City

Damascus, with an estimated pre-conflict population of approximately 1.7 million residents within the city limits and around 2.5 million in the metropolitan area (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010), served as a dynamic case study for assessing urban identity. As one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Damascus's demographics have been shaped by millennia of historical events, migrations, and cultural exchanges, offering a rich tapestry of human development.

An in-depth exploration of this metropolis promised significant insights, which may help shape urban planning and cultural preservation strategies, not only in Damascus but in similar historic and culturally significant cities around the globe.

3.1. Historical Background of Damascus

The city of Damascus is not merely a geographical entity, but a complex tapestry that has been woven over millennia. Its historical significance transcends the boundaries of time and space, offering a unique lens through which one can assess the evolution of urban identity. We can identify the critical periods that have been instrumental in shaping Damascus's urban identity, as follows:

- The ancient roots: pre-Islamic era

Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, with evidence of settlement dating back to the third millennium BCE [15]. Located strategically along the Barada River, the city was a crossroads of several civilizations, including the Arameans, Romans, and Byzantines. The Roman period, in particular, left an indelible mark on the city's architectural landscape, most notably the construction of the Temple of Jupiter and the Via Recta, the city's main thoroughfare [20].

- Islamic golden age: Umayyad Caliphate

The advent of Islam in the 7th century CE marked a pivotal chapter in the city's history. Damascus became the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate, transforming it into a hub for Islamic culture, governance, and architecture [21]. The construction of the Umayyad Mosque in 705 CE served as a seminal point in the city's urban development, symbolizing the synthesis of various architectural styles and cultural influences [22].

- Medieval to Ottoman periods

Following the decline of the Umayyad Caliphate, Damascus underwent periods of instability but remained an important center for trade and scholarship under various Islamic dynasties. The city's urban fabric was further enriched during the Ottoman era (1516–1918), as characterized by the construction of khans (caravanserais); hammams (bathhouses); and souks (markets), which are integral to its urban identity even today [16].

- Modern era: 20th century to present

The 20th century brought unprecedented challenges and transformations. The French Mandate (1920–1946) introduced European urban planning principles, sometimes at the expense of traditional urban forms [14]. Post-independence, rapid urbanization and political instability have threatened the city's historical heritage, yet Damascus continues to evolve as a complex, multi-layered entity [23].

This research explored the relationship between these diverse historical influences and the contemporary urban identity of Damascus. It has attempted to unravel the enduring dialogue between the past and the present, providing insights for future urban planning, cultural preservation, and identity enhancement endeavors. By exploring the historical context of Damascus, we aimed to understand the city, not merely as a physical space, but as a lived experience, shaped by the passage of time. Figure 2 illustrates the city of Damascus as our research area.

3.2. *The Evolution of Material Aspects in Damascus's Urban Identity Across Three Epochs*

Following the methodological framework delineated by [19], urban identity was conceptualized through a bifurcated lens, comprising both material and immaterial dimensions. Understanding how these aspects change over time is vital in fully grasping the shifts in a city's identity. In this section, the focus will be on the physical aspects of Damascus during three specific periods: until 1929, between 1929 and 1968, and from 1968 to 2010. Mansour, et al., 2023 [19], further categorized these material elements into two sub-dimensions: the natural elements—such as topography, hydrology, and vegetation—and the man-made elements—such as urban morphology, streets, and public squares.

3.2.1. Natural Elements

Throughout history, Damascus has been shaped by its natural elements, with changes in its landscape profoundly impacting its urban identity. This evolution, marked by references to key scholars, reveals how geography, vegetation, and climate have played crucial roles.

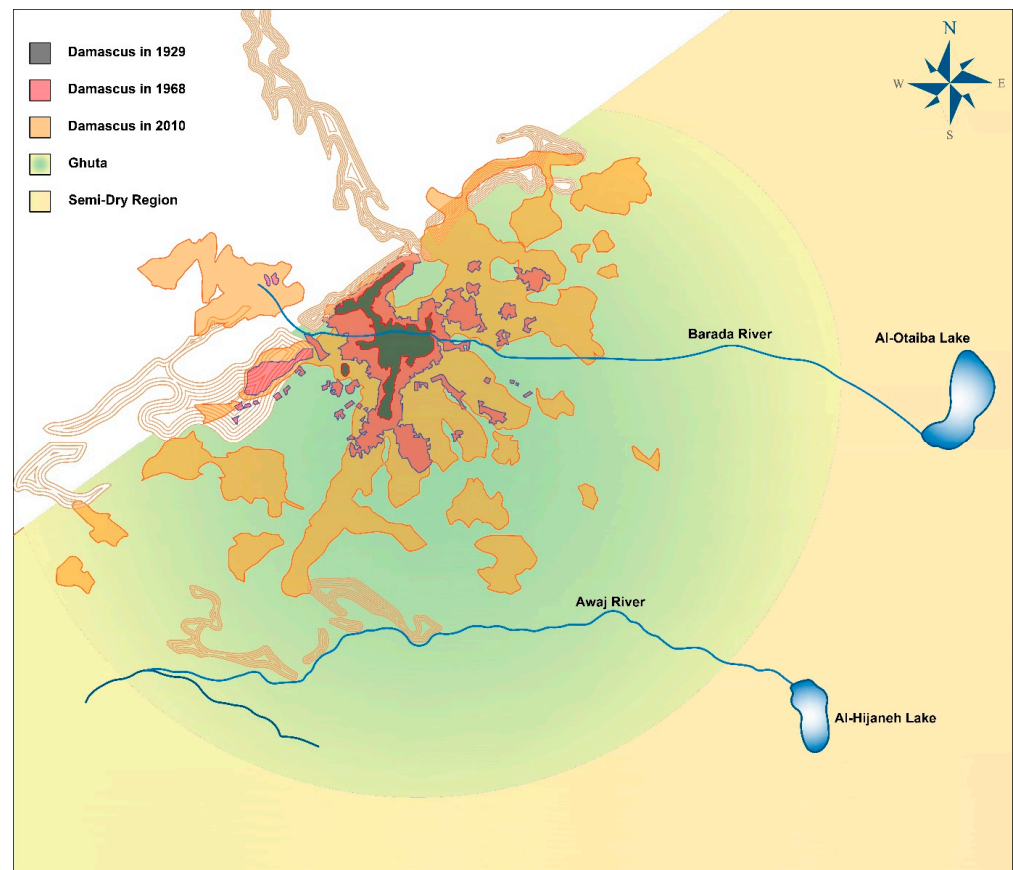


Figure 3. Natural elements of Damascus city.

- **From 1929 to 1968**

Ref. [24] observed that, during this period, the expansion of Damascus continued towards Mount Qasioun and into Ghuta. This growth led to a topographical shift, with the city starting to build on the mountainside. Vegetation cover, though reduced, remained a vital feature, with continued efforts in tree planting and park establishment. The Barada River, previously the main water source, was supplemented by the Fijeh spring due to modern irrigation [25]. From the spatial analysis and the study of areal images, we were able to calculate a change rate of 200% in the expansion of Damascus city between 1929 and 1968. The vast majority of this expansion was on the Ghuta.

- **From 1968 to 2010**

Damascus's growth shifted towards the suburbs, with significant expansions towards the west and into the Ghuta, as outlined by [27]. This period saw Mount Qasioun and the semi-dry region evolve from being regional boundaries to integral parts of the city. Urban development on Mount Qasioun's slopes and the lower terrain areas of Ghuta changed the city's main terrain. Vegetation cover declined dramatically due to urban expansion and the drying up of the Barada River, with informal housing emerging on green areas [24].

Water scarcity became a significant environmental problem, with the Fijeh spring and artesian wells becoming the primary water sources for the city [24]. The climate also underwent changes due to global warming, leading to more distinct seasonal transitions.

From the spatial analysis and the study of areal images, we were able to calculate a change rate of 290% in the expansion of Damascus city between 1968 and 2010. The vast majority of this expansion was on the Ghuta.

These huge changes have led to dramatic changes in the soil and the atmosphere of Damascus [28].

3.2.2. Man-Made Elements

- **Up to 1929**

The urban and architectural development of Damascus up to 1929 reflects a rich interplay of traditional Islamic and Western influences. This evolution, as documented by various scholars, showcased the city's transition from a classical Islamic city to one exhibiting Western urban patterns [24].

Urban pattern and Islamic influence: The urban landscape of Damascus until 1929 was characterized by two predominant styles: the traditional Islamic pattern and the Western urban pattern. The Islamic city within the ancient walls was developed over various periods from the remnants of earlier civilizations, such as Greek and Roman [29]. This traditional style, marked by winding streets and a hierarchy of spaces that were centered around religious sites, evolved through several Islamic periods. Ref. [30], noted that the initial Islamic city retained the Roman street network, but with successive Islamic rules, these wide streets transformed into narrow, winding lanes.

Refs. [31,32], highlighted that the Islamic city's features, such as its protective wall, mosque, and water supply, were the main characteristics of Arab–Muslim cities. This urban style experienced significant transformations during the Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods (Figure 4). Ref. [15], illustrated the Ayyubid era's comprehensive planning, which was marked by the expansion beyond the city walls and rigorous renovation work, including strengthening the Roman gates and improving public utilities. Ref. [26], described the Mamluk period as a time of restoration and construction, with a shift in economic activities and the emergence of new market areas.



Figure 4. The transformation of the orthogonal chess fabric to the organic planning of the city. Source: Adapted from [33].

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Western influence and modernization: During the Ottoman period, Damascus underwent major urban transformations, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Refs. [15–26,28–34], detail this era's reorganization efforts, including expanding narrow streets, designing new suburbs, and transitioning to stone building materials. This period saw the introduction of Western architectural concepts, as described by [35], with the creation of new residential suburbs, such as Al-Muhajireen, which were characterized by wide boulevards and public parks. Refs. [32–36], noted that these changes led to a clear division between the traditional Old City and modern neighborhoods, with low-income families remaining in the former (Figure 5).

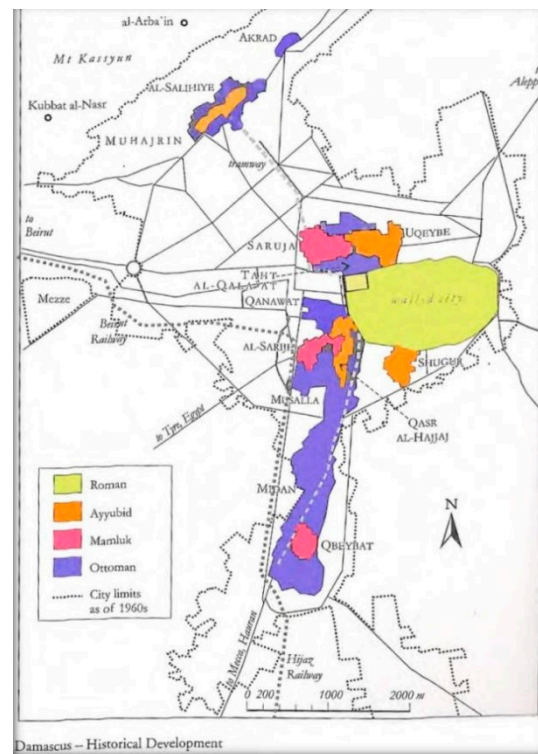


Figure 5. Damascus's growth from the Roman to the Ottoman period. Source: Ref. [37].

Architectural symbols and landscape features: The Islamic architecture of Damascus, as [38,39], pointed out, was distinct in its use of horizontal projections, façades, and entrances. Mosques, minarets, and khans were central to the Islamic architectural vocabulary (Figure 6), while the Western style introduced during the Ottoman period brought new concepts, such as direct street access and external openness.



Figure 6. Islamic architecture in old Damascus (September 2020).

Refs. [39,40], explored the contrast between the traditional and Western urban landscapes. The traditional style emphasized a hierarchical transition from public to private spaces. This was absent in the Western designs, which favored open external spaces, such as squares and gardens.

The vertical dimension of the city: The city's vertical profile, until the end of the 19th century, was dominated by minarets, the tallest structures in the city. The advent of modernity brought changes in building techniques, allowing for taller buildings, yet these generally did not exceed the height of the minarets until the French Mandate period [40].

In summary, the man-made elements of Damascus up to 1929 presented a city at the crossroads of Islamic tradition and Western modernization. This historical period was marked by a complex blend of architectural styles, urban planning concepts, and landscape transformations, which reflected the city's rich cultural and historical tapestry.

- **From 1929 to 1968**

Between 1929 and 1968, Damascus experienced significant urban and architectural transformations. This period marked the integration of new urban patterns and architectural styles, influenced by the French Mandate and global trends, as well as the adaptation of traditional elements to modern needs.

Urban pattern evolution: French Mandate's influence (1918–1946): Post-Ottoman Damascus entered a new phase under the French Mandate. Ref. [25], noted that the French-initiated urban development plans disregarded local traditions. They introduced wide tree-lined streets and new residential suburbs. The first organizational plan of the city, by French planners Danger and Écochard, in 1935, focused on infrastructure and beautification, positioning Damascus within French planning experiments [15–26,28–34]. Despite these modifications, the city's expansion faced resistance, being hindered by bureaucracy and a reluctance to alter existing structures [15]. The French plans, as [41] described, solidified the divide between the old and new city, perpetuating the notion of the ancient city as backward.

Global orientation post-World War II: After the Second World War, Damascus saw the adoption of Western urban models to address housing needs. Ref. [42] highlighted this period's emphasis on separate high buildings or residential units that were made of reinforced concrete, reflecting modern movement concepts. This shift was accompanied by the development of new regulations and laws, altering the city's urban system and architectural style.

Streets and squares: The introduction of automobiles drastically altered street design. During the French Mandate, streets such as Baghdad Street and Abu Rummaneh were widened to accommodate military and civilian vehicles [42]. Despite efforts to reduce traffic congestion, including Ecochard's proposal of ring roads around the Old City in 1935, significant challenges remained until the 1968 plan by Ecochard, which transformed the city's transportation network [30] (Figure 7).

Architectural symbols: French Mandate architecture: ref. [41], detailed the architecture of this period—characterized by functional design, a blend of traditional and Western styles, and the use of stone baroque motifs. The colonial-style architecture, though similar across the Maghreb and Mashreq, exhibited regional variations (Figure 8).

World-oriented architecture: Post-war buildings incorporated elements of traditional architecture, such as arches, but used modern materials, such as wood, glass, and reinforced concrete [42]. This period saw a departure from visual luxuries, focusing on functionality and the ability to accommodate contemporary human activities (Figure 9).

Urban landscape features: In addition to the existing styles, two modern styles emerged: one during the Mandate period and the other reflecting a global orientation. Ref. [30], observed that modern cities have lost the concept of urban space seen in traditional fabrics, with the streets becoming the dominant element in urban landscapes.

Vertical dimension: Building heights increased due to advancements in construction methods and materials, particularly reinforced concrete. Post-independence, this trend continued, reflecting the city's growing urban and architectural ambitions [41].

In summary, the period between 1929 and 1968 was one of significant urban and architectural evolution for Damascus. The city navigated between preserving its rich historical legacy and embracing new, globally influenced urban and architectural trends. This era represents a crucial phase in the city’s development, reflecting a complex interplay of tradition and modernity.

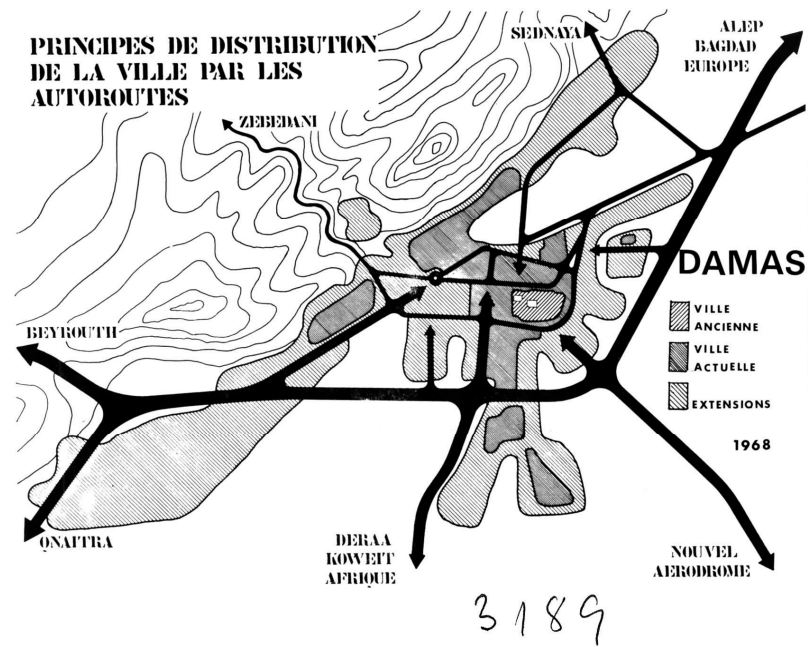


Figure 7. Ecochard’s plan for Damascus city, 1968. Source: Atlas of Damascus (2010).



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Figure 8. Damascus in the 1940s. Source: Écochard: Damascus Album (Part One of Two Parts) https://www.archnet.org/collections/394?media_content_id=93055. Access date: 25 March 2020. Copyright © Aga Khan Trust for Culture.



Figure 9. Buildings showing the world-oriented architecture style in Damascus (September 2020).

- **From 1968 to 2010**

Between 1968 and 2010, Damascus underwent significant changes in its urban pattern, streets, architectural symbols, urban landscape, and vertical dimension. This period reflected the city's struggle to balance modernity with its historical identity.

Urban pattern—global influence: The period saw a strong ascendancy of an urban pattern that was influenced by the modern movement, as described by [27]. This pattern—characterized by commercial controlled to a loss of traditional urban voids in newly planned neighborhoods.

Random urban pattern: Ref. [30], identified a contrasting trend of random urban development, which emerged as a significant threat to the city's identity. Illegal settlements, housing approximately 20% of Damascus's population, highlighted the housing crisis driven by immigration, ineffective housing laws, and government reliance on the private and cooperative sectors. These areas shared similarities with the Old City in terms of their winding roads and organic structures, but lacked its deep urban meaning and failed to meet basic population needs (Figure 10).

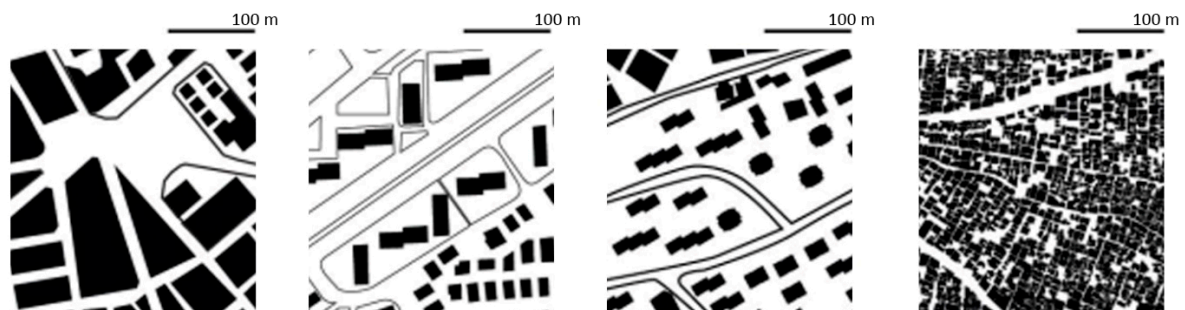


Figure 10. Current urban patterns in Damascus city. Source: adapted from Wifstrand (2009).

Streets and squares: Informal areas—streets in informal areas remained narrow and traditional, failing to accommodate modern transportation needs [40].

Modern style—in contrast, the modern style introduced bridges and tunnels to alleviate traffic congestion. Recent developments, especially in areas such as New Damascus

and Kafar Sousa, have seen the emergence of wide, well-lit streets, which are indicative of a new era [42].

Architectural symbols: The modern urban patterns, as [42], noted, exhibited a significant poverty in visual identity. Slums and repetitive urban patterns contributed to visual distortion in the city. Despite some modern buildings attempting to merge local concepts with contemporary styles, such as the Prime Ministerial Building in Kafr Sousse, these were exceptions rather than the norm.

Urban landscape features: Loss of urban void the concept of urban void, which was crucial in traditional urban styles, was lost in modern patterns. This loss, coupled with the absence of aesthetic features such as trees and vegetation, led to a dilution of the city's unique characteristics [40].

Vertical dimension: Rise in building heights—since the 1970s, building heights have increased significantly, altering the city's skyline. The presence of tall structures, such as the Damascus Tower and the Yalbugha complex near the Old City, created a stark contrast. In modern neighborhoods, such as Mazzeh Highway or East Rukn El Din, high-rise buildings were more harmonious due to their distance from the Old City [30] (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Yalbugha complex and its proximity to the Old City (September 2020).

In summary, the period between 1968 and 2010 in Damascus was marked by a complex interplay between traditional and modern influences. The city grappled with the challenges of rapid urbanization, the emergence of informal settlements, and the integration of modern architectural styles and urban planning concepts. This era represents a pivotal phase in Damascus's evolution, where its historical legacy coexisted with, and was often overshadowed by, the forces of contemporary urban development.

3.3. The Metamorphosis of Immaterial Facets in Damascus's Urban Identity Across Three Epochs

The immaterial components of Damascus, spanning from its early history to 2010, reflect the city's evolving social environment, cultural values, and economic relations. This narrative integrates various scholarly insights to present a chronological understanding of these changes.

- **Until 1929**

Social and cultural values: Up to 1929, Damascus was characterized by a blend of traditional and modern social values. Ref. [35], noted that the traditional environment was marked by privacy, which was achieved through the separation of motor and optical axes and a hierarchy transitioning from public to private spaces. Ref. [43], observed that, unlike modern neighborhoods, there was no class distinction in traditional society, with housing being spontaneous and organic. During the 1920s, particularly under King Faisal's rule, Damascus experienced a surge in press activity. In this period, approximately 42 newspapers and 13 journals were established in Syria, with more than half based in Damascus. This proliferation was indicative of a relatively open public discourse and a burgeoning interest in political and cultural matters [44].

Historical and archaeological characteristics: Ref. [37], highlighted that Damascus's historical features, such as the buildings and monuments within the Old City walls, contributed significantly to its urban identity.

Cultural activities: Ref. [45], described the traditional urban environment as rich in cultural activities and religious rituals, with mosques and churches playing a central role in daily life.

- **From 1929 to 1968**

Social and cultural values: During this period (marked by the French Mandate and independence) there were shifts in social values. Ref. [42], noted the disappearance of the hierarchical concept of space and a rise in class disparity. Refs. [27,36–46], pointed out that urban cohesion diminished, reflecting changes in social relationships. In 1968, Damascus's newspaper landscape was characterized by a limited number of publications, primarily under state control. The Ba'ath Party's consolidation of power in 1963 led to increased media regulation, resulting in the closure of many independent newspapers [47].

Meaning in urban content: Ref. [26], argued that urbanism became a reflection of French concepts, with economic interests dominating over cultural references.

Historical and archaeological characteristics: Ref. [41], described a lack of respect for the traditional fabric of the city, particularly the areas outside the old walls during the French Mandate, leading to decades of neglect.

- **From 1968 to 2010**

Social and cultural values: The modern urban style of this period grappled with privacy issues, as residents modified dwellings to meet their needs. Refs. [27,30–48], observed that class disparities became more pronounced, and social cohesion within families and neighborhoods weakened.

Meaning in urban content: the era saw the dominance of economic interests over traditional cultural values, leading to a loss of meaning in the urban landscape [45] (Figure 12).

Historical and archaeological characteristics: Ref. [41], noted that the Old City of Damascus regained attention in the 1990s, but investment focused on quick profit, which led to irregularities in the old fabric. The rise of large concrete structures near historical sites marked a loss of historical and archaeological value.

Cultural activities: Damascus's selection as the Arab cultural capital brought a resurgence of cultural events [40].

Economic relations: The Central Statistical Office reported that Damascus saw significant economic and touristic developments between 2000 and 2010, contributing to the city's and to Syria's economic growth [49].

In summary, the immaterial components of Damascus from its early history until 2010 showcase a city transitioning through various phases of social, cultural, and economic evolution. These changes reflect the city's journey from a traditional society with strong cultural roots to one influenced by modern, global trends, impacting its social fabric, cultural activities, and economic dynamics.



Figure 12. The expansion of slums over Mount Qasioun (September 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

This study's comprehensive analysis of Damascus across three significant historical periods revealed a multifaceted transformation of the city's urban identity. By employing our multi-dimensional methodological framework, we have integrated qualitative and quantitative data to uncover specific patterns and factors influencing this evolution. The findings highlight how material and immaterial elements have interacted over time, leading to the current state of Damascus's urban identity.

Urban Growth Dynamics

Using geographic information systems (GISs) to analyze spatial data from each historical period, we calculated the rates of urban expansion in Damascus. The findings indicated a dramatic increase in the urban area over the examined periods, particularly encroaching upon the Ghuta region.

Between 1929 and 1968, the urban area expanded from approximately 35 square kilometers to around 105 square kilometers, representing a 200% increase. This expansion was primarily over the fertile lands of the Ghuta, indicating a shift from agricultural to urban land use.

Between 1968 and 2010, the urban area further increased to around 410 square kilometers, marking a 290% increase. The majority of this growth continued over the Ghuta, significantly reducing green spaces and agricultural lands. Figure 13 shows the expansion of the city towards Ghuta over the years.

Impact on Natural Elements

The rapid urban expansion has had profound effects on Damascus's natural environment, as follows:

Vegetation cover reduction: An analysis of land use maps showed that Ghuta's vegetation cover has decreased by over 70% since 1929. This loss of green space has led to diminished air quality and reduced natural cooling effects, exacerbating urban heat island phenomena.

Water scarcity: The over-extraction of water from the Barada River and Fijeh spring has led to a 30% decrease in water flow over the past four decades [24]. This scarcity has impacted both domestic water supply and agricultural activities.

Soil degradation: Urban sprawl has led to soil sealing, reducing groundwater recharge and increasing surface temperatures and runoff [28], which is contributing to erosion and flooding risks.



Figure 13. Comparative photos of Damascus city between 1929 and 2023. Exhibit (A): on the left, is a photo taken from Mount Qasioun in the 1920s. Source: archive of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Exhibit (B): on the right, is a photo taken also from Mount Qasioun in April 2023. Source: the authors.

Changes in Architectural Styles and Urban Morphology

- **Up to 1929**

Urban pattern: The city exhibited a dense organic layout, with narrow, winding streets typical of traditional Islamic urban design [31]. Public and private spaces were intricately linked, fostering strong community interactions.

Architectural symbols: dominated by structures such as the Umayyad Mosque and traditional courtyard houses, architecture emphasized inward-looking designs for privacy and social cohesion [38].

- **From 1929 to 1968**

Introduction of Western styles: The French Mandate introduced European urban planning concepts, leading to wider boulevards and grid-like street patterns in new districts [15].

Ecochard plan implementation: The 1968 Ecochard plan restructured the city's transportation network by introducing ring roads, which altered the traditional urban fabric [30]. A GIS analysis showed that new road networks increased accessibility but also fragmented historic neighborhoods.

- **From 1968 to 2010**

Modernist architecture's dominance: the prevalence of concrete, high-rise buildings changed the skyline, with structures such as the Damascus Tower exceeding traditional height norms [30].

Informal settlements' growth: Due to housing shortages, informal settlements expanded, housing approximately 40% of the city's population by 2010 [27]. These areas lack proper infrastructure and services, contributing to urban inequality.

Loss of Historical Urban Fabric

Encroachment on historic sites: photographic documentation revealed that modern constructions, such as the Yalbugha Complex, adjacent to the Old City, have disrupted the historical continuity and aesthetics (Figure 11).

Degradation of heritage buildings: field surveys identified numerous heritage buildings in states of disrepair due to inadequate conservation efforts and urban pressures favoring new developments.

Shifts in Social Structures and Cultural Values

Over time, Damascus's social and cultural values have shifted dramatically. Until 1929, the city was marked by a cohesive, inclusive social structure, with privacy and community embedded in its spatial layout, free from rigid class divisions. This period saw a flourishing public discourse, with many newspapers reflecting growing political and cultural interests. However, from 1929 to 1968, the social fabric began to fragment under the French Mandate and early independence, as economic disparities created distinct class-based neighborhoods. Social cohesion waned and increased state control limited public expression. Post-1968, modernization introduced privacy challenges and intensified class divides, further weakening community bonds. This period marked a transition from a unified, community-oriented city to a stratified, fragmented urban identity, reflecting profound shifts in Damascus's social landscape.

Economic Pressures and Demographic Changes

Population growth: the city's population grew from approximately 1 million in 1968 to over 4 million by 2010, driven by rural–urban migration and regional conflicts (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

Housing affordability crisis: real estate prices have soared, making housing unaffordable for many and pushing low-income residents into informal settlements.

State Policies and their Influence on Urban Identity

A critical factor in shaping Damascus's urban identity has been state policies and urban strategies. Historically, until the end of Islamic dominance, Arab cities, including Damascus, shared common urban characteristics, fostering a harmonious cityscape. Post-World War I, with the decline of Islamic control and the advent of Western colonialism, these cities began to diverge from their traditional identities. Some retained their Arab characteristics, while others, under colonial influence, adopted European urban models. In Damascus, this research highlighted the following:

Urban planning policies: The lack of updated master plans since the 1968 Ecochard Plan has led to uncoordinated development. Delays in finalizing new plans have resulted in haphazard growth and inadequate infrastructure.

Heritage conservation efforts: Despite some initiatives, there has been insufficient protection of historical sites. Regulatory frameworks are either outdated or poorly enforced, leading to unauthorized alterations and demolitions.

Damascus's Contemporary Identity

Currently, Damascus's identity can be segmented into three distinct categories: an economic city, a historical city facing destruction, and a city marked by randomness. The transformation of cities such as Dubai, Doha, and Abu Dhabi into modern global metropolises contrast sharply with the historical centers of cities such as Baghdad and Damascus, where randomness and a lack of effective urban planning are evident. This shift has led to societal, cultural, and behavioral changes, emphasizing individuality as a hallmark of the new capitalist system. This transformation is evident in the urban landscape of Damascus, where the challenges of managing large human populations in limited urban spaces have become increasingly apparent. Table 2 summarizes the results of this research.

Based on the results shown in Table 2, we can track the transformation of Damascus's urban identity from a stable state in 1929 to a fragmented state in 1968, from whence it continued to deteriorate until it was in a critical state of loss.

The findings of this study have provided new insights into the urban identity of Damascus by tracing its evolution across three significant historical phases. Unlike prior studies, which often focused on isolated aspects of Damascus's urban structure or specific architectural elements, this research has offered a comprehensive view of the city's transformation, capturing the interplay between architectural, socio-political, and spatial changes that define its identity.

Table 2. Results of the methodological approach’s application.

Historical Period	Architectural Characteristics	Demographic Profile	Spatial Organization	Socio-Political Influences	Key Urban Identity Traits
Up to 1929	Traditional Islamic and Ottoman architecture: mudbrick and stone and Umayyad Mosque’s prominence.	Predominantly Muslim, with smaller Christian and Jewish communities.	Dense, organic urban layout: narrow, winding streets and high integration of public and private spaces.	Islamic governance structures: focus on community-driven social order and very rich cultural atmosphere.	Strong neighborhood cohesion and emphasis on shared community spaces.
Between 1929 and 1968	Integration of European-style architecture with traditional Islamic styles, especially in areas developed for administrative functions.	Diverse population, with new European residents and migrant groups.	Introduction of grid-like layouts, zoning for government and residential use, and establishment of modern infrastructure in select areas.	French Mandate control, imposing Western planning models and urban regulations.	Increasing socio-spatial differentiation and shifts in traditional community dynamics.
Between 1968 and 2010	Predominance of modernist architecture, with concrete high-rise structures, often influenced by socialist and utilitarian designs.	High influx of rural migrants and population diversity, including refugees.	Expansion of city boundaries: informal settlements grew due to housing shortages and increased urban demand.	State-directed socialist urban policies, focusing on rapid modernization and housing projects.	Fragmentation of historical identity: challenges in maintaining traditional heritage amidst rapid, unregulated development.

Comparative Analysis with Previous Studies

Previous research has examined elements of Damascus’s urban development, particularly in the context of Islamic architecture and colonial-era transformations. For instance, Ref. [50] explored the intricacies of traditional courtyard houses and their role in sustaining community bonds within neighborhoods. While this work highlighted important architectural attributes, it did not address the city’s longitudinal transformation in identity across historical phases, particularly in response to socio-political shifts. This study built on such findings by extending the scope to include later developments, especially the post-colonial period, where modernization and socialist planning policies introduced new architectural forms that fragmented the city’s historical continuity [51].

Similarly, Ref. [14] discussed the effects of the colonial influence on Damascus, noting the socio-spatial differentiation brought about by the French Mandate. This study expanded upon that work by contrasting the colonial period with pre-colonial spatial cohesion and examining the further socio-spatial fragmentation under post-colonial policies. By contextualizing Damascus’s transformation within each phase, this study provided a nuanced understanding of how the city’s identity evolved, not only as a result of external colonial forces but also through internally driven policies during the post-colonial era [41].

Contributions to Urban Identity and Heritage Conservation Discourse

One of the primary contributions of this study lies in its multi-dimensional framework, which integrated qualitative and quantitative analyses to capture both the material and immaterial aspects of urban identity. This approach contrasted with prior research, which often focused solely on physical transformations, thereby overlooking the cultural and social dimensions integral to Damascus’s identity. Through this lens, the study revealed how government-led planning in the post-colonial period, while necessary to address urbanization pressures, challenged heritage preservation by promoting utilitarian structures that neglected traditional aesthetics [52].

Furthermore, this study has underscored the importance of sustainable urban planning in preserving the historical fabric of cities undergoing rapid modernization. The findings suggest that, without an integrated approach that respects cultural heritage, urban policies risk eroding the unique identity of cities such as Damascus, which concurs with [53]. This insight offers valuable guidance for policymakers and urban planners in regions facing similar urbanization challenges, demonstrating that heritage preservation can coexist with modern development if appropriately managed.

5. Conclusions

This comprehensive analysis of Damascus, spanning from its early history to the present day, has revealed a city grappling with the complexities of urban identity amidst various historical, social, and political transformations. This study has traversed the city's journey through time, examining its natural, physical, and immaterial components, and how these elements have collectively shaped its urban identity.

Regarding the evolution of urban identity, Damascus's urban identity has evolved significantly, influenced by various historical epochs, each leaving its mark on the city's fabric. From the traditional Islamic city, marked by its unique social values and urban layout, to the influence of Western urban styles during the French Mandate, and, finally, to the modern globalized city. Each period has contributed to the city's rich and multifaceted identity.

Challenges and Transformation

The city faces significant challenges in its quest for sustainable urban transformation. The identity crisis of Damascus is not merely a result of architectural and urban planning decisions, but is deeply rooted in historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors. These challenges include environmental issues, such as water scarcity; urban problems, such as informal housing; and socio-cultural shifts, reflecting a move towards individualism in the face of global economic dynamics.

State Policies and Urban Strategies

A critical factor in shaping Damascus's urban identity has been state policies and urban strategies. The city's transformation, particularly in the post-Islamic period, reflects a shift from traditional Arab characteristics to modern global influences. This transition has resulted in a city with a fragmented identity, oscillating between its historical roots and contemporary aspirations.

Future Directions

Looking ahead, this study underscores the need for a balanced approach to urban development in Damascus. This involves respecting and preserving the city's rich historical heritage, while embracing modern urban planning and architectural practices. Sustainable urban transformation in Damascus requires a holistic approach, which considers not just the physical and aesthetic aspects, but also the socio-cultural and environmental dimensions.

In conclusion, Damascus's journey through various historical periods illustrates the complexities and challenges of maintaining a coherent urban identity in the face of changing times and influences. The city's future lies in finding a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity, ensuring that its rich heritage is preserved, while adapting to the demands of contemporary urban living. As Damascus continues to evolve, it remains a testament to the resilience and adaptability of urban spaces in the face of ever-changing global dynamics.

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