



The setting

Cities are heterogeneous structures of social organization. Thousands of men and women act daily in this complex system and leave their mark on the city's appearance. Cities are expressions of collective actions by their inhabitants corresponding to cultural traditions and changing circumstances. Social interaction therefore must be visible in the surroundings of human action: architecture and urban organization. Urban centres are an expression of the conventions of a society's organization. In this sense cities provide a rich source for studies of cultural history. Cities with all their many layers allow a unique approach to societies in historical perspective.

Today cities in the Middle East clearly suffer from enormous social problems. Structural change and the general economic and social crises had a strong impact on historical town centres in the region. In Lebanon the civil war in particular turned these outstanding sites of human cultural production into places of social crises. A lack of responsibility resulted in the neglect of the urban environment. Today, this is changing. Local communities want to know more about the legacy of their grandfathers' history. The German Orient Institute is helping to recover this memory and facilitate identification with the past of the cities it studies by providing information and re-establishing a direct link to that past. In Damascus, Saida and Tripoli three different research projects are being carried out:

The projects in Damascus, Saida and Tripoli

- Damascus

The German Institute of Archaeology in Damascus is examining historic and cultural change of an Ottoman provincial capital through its architecture. The UNESCO listed Damascus in 1979 as a World Heritage Site. Drawing on domestic and public architecture and its political, social, and economic background, this research tries to understand the motivations of the protagonists in urban societies and their answers to specific questions of the time. Likewise architecture and its

historical development help to subdivide Ottoman rule in different stages. The characteristics of a certain period can be studied through different concepts of building in the private and public spheres.

With financial support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, a survey of architecture in Ottoman Damascus was carried out between 1997 and 2001 in order to document the development of this Arab city during the four Ottoman centuries. More than 500 public buildings and 650 private dwellings have been documented by written and photographic records. For many houses and buildings ground-plans have been drawn. These ground-plans and maps had been digitalized together with the French cadastral map on AutoCAD. Working in co-operation with the Institut Français d'Etudes Arabes de Damas (IFEAD), we have so far redrawn 25,000 plots in full detail (AutoCAD). Using an access program, his material was then converted into a GIS (Geographical Information System) format that also contains the outcomes of historical research into all the available visual and textual sources: consular reports by the British Foreign Office and the German Auswärtiges Amt and some 500 documents from the Syrian National Archive (mainly court-records, *waqfiyyas* and *awamir sultaniyya*) have been included in the study. Together with travel accounts, historical newspapers and guidebooks, prosopographic, biographic, and autobiographic reports, they have provided an abundance of vital information on urban life and individuals.

- Saida (Lebanon)

The Debbané Foundation in cooperation with the Orient Institute in Beirut is carrying out a comparative project to document public and domestic architecture in Saida in the light of other buildings of the region – especially in Syria and Lebanon. The aim is to document the Palais Debbané, the city of Saida as well as comparable architecture of Ottoman times in the Lebanese Mountains. The Debbané palace in Saida is one of the important monuments on the Lebanese coast. Founded in 1134/1721-22 as a palace of a local notable, it reflects the history of Lebanon over the last three centuries. To protect this outstanding house the Debbané Foundation seeks to establish a museum documenting the very many aspects of urban live and architecture and to act as a cultural centre for communicating aspects of the history of this house, Saida and the urban heritage of the region.

The majority of Saida's public and private buildings in the old city, nearly all commercial buildings (*suq, khan*), bathes (*hammam*), mosques, and private houses, originate from the Ottoman period (1516-1918). The very rich houses as well as the huge bazaar are impressive monuments to the cultural production of Arab society in Ottoman times. Also here the cadastral map was

digitalized and most of the established material (ground maps, photos etc.) has been compiled in a digital catalogue ready to transfer into a GIS system.

- Tripoli

The German Institute is also engaged in an international and multidisciplinary research project in cooperation with the Municipality of Tripoli and the Lebanese University. This project aims to document the architecture and historical sources (preliminary court records) of the old town of Tripoli, which, with its 164 registered monuments, is the most important old city of Lebanon. The German Foreign Ministry will contribute financial support for technical equipment for the international documentation office in Tripoli and for the restoration of the historical Suq al-Kharaj. This project, conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture of the Lebanese Republic, consists of three elements:

1. First, a digital survey of the architectural heritage of the city in close cooperation with the Tripoli School of Architecture and the Municipality of Tripoli. This documentation will be archived with an access program that can be imported to the existing GIS database of the municipality.
2. Second an index of the Ottoman court records of Tripoli (*sijillat al-mahakim al-shar'iyah*), which is the most important source for the history of the city of Tripoli, in cooperation with professors at the Lebanese University.
3. In a third step, both digitalized databases – the index of the records and the database of the architecture of the old town – will be connected through the GIS system. On the basis of single geographical units (cadastral lots) we will integrate the material collected by the architectural historians with the information compiled through the study of court records.

Results

Architecture and history are interwoven and help to explain each other. All three projects make it possible to combine a normal architectural survey with aspects of micro history and to retell stories of social action and the transformation of urban space (mainly in Ottoman times, 1516 to 1918). These projects create a detailed picture of urban societies and daily life. For some buildings it was possible to clarify the biography of the owner, his economic and social background, his training, and his motivations for building activities. For certain buildings there are a variety of sources – *maqfiyyas*, court records, or contemporary accounts and descriptions, historical photographs, inscriptions, decoration, furniture, wall paintings, ground-plans, location

details, or construction materials – that supply the information needed to understand in detail the architectural space and its changes over time.

The fully digitalized data on Saida, Damascus and Tripoli could form the basis of a heritage data pool on urban centres in the Middle East. These very large projects on three major cities of the region bring together for the first time the documentation of history and architecture on the same level, connecting them within a digital system.

Short CV:

Stefan Weber was between December 1996 and November 2001 a Junior Research Fellow at the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) in Damascus for History of Islamic Art and Architecture. He received his M.A. from Bonn University in 1996 and his Ph.D. from the Free University of Berlin in 2001. Since 2001 he is postdoctoral research fellow for History and Art History at the Orient-Institute Beirut (OIB).

He is author of several articles and co-editor of "The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the late Ottoman Empire" (2002). Weber gave many public lectures among other at MIT, Harvard, Sorbonne, SOAS and other universities in the Middle East and Europe. He teaches at the American University of Beirut and the Tripoli School for Restoration. He currently organises the research and documentation project on Tripoli, the restoration project of the Mamluk Suq Haraj in Tripoli and the Saida History Museum of the Debbané Foundation (on urban history and the Ottoman house). He was art historical advisor of Restoration projects, like the Restoration of the Aqqad House by the Danish Carsten Niebuhr Institute and David Foundation. He organised several summer schools and conferences on Middle Eastern history and architecture

Weber is member of the 'International Council on Monuments and Sites' (ICOMOS) and board member of the 'Syrian Studies Association' (SSA, USA).