

Chapter 8

Craftsmanship for Reconstruction: Artisans Shaping Syrian Cities



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Abstract Craftsmanship had a crucial role in shaping Syrian society and its relation to the built environment. Organisations and guilds of artisans were official regulators and mediators between artisans, state architects, courts and private house dwellers. It was through these guilds structure that the training of crafts took place to provide technical and social know-how to contextualise those structures within the city. Also, it was through the guild that the technology transfer came about by immigrants and moving artisans. The paper argues that the loss of this medium at the beginning of the twentieth century resulted in a dichotomy between architecture and building practice, specifically by excluding the popular builder from any formal representation in the state. This dichotomy led to fundamental alterations in modern construction, the nature of the planned and unplanned, the local and global and the private and public. Illustrating the development of the guild structure could reveal how the public and private construction developed in the region. The paper rereads two pivotal texts written about craftsmanship in Damascus in the 1880s. It compares the social structure in construction guilds with those of guilds in other disciplines, and explains the distinctiveness of the builders' guild and its relation to the state. Finally, the paper examines the remnants of guilds structures in the modern Syrian society, specifically in the popular non-institutional training systems. In Syrian cities today, architects are not the primary key players and, in some cases, are completely absent. Almost half of modern Damascus and Aleppo is built by builders with a minimum, if any, intervention from architects or planners. Unlike the traditional artisans and their guilds, those modern builders have no official representation. How could any rebuilding plan be more inclusive and address those builders? There could be a possible answer in the relationship between craftsmanship and the city.

Keywords Craftsmanship · Reconstruction · Guild · Building trades · Damascus

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8.1 Introduction: The Guild

Craft trades were part of the socio-economic character of major Syrian cities, guilds had a crucial role as channels of representation for artisans in their societies and regulated their relationships to their states. In Damascus 1850–1900, notes on builders' guild show the essential role of master builders in regulating micro-planning, working directly with residents and authorities, and participating in private and public construction. This suggests understanding craft as a model that is practice-and not just object-oriented, a model with which might have lessons to learn for the reconstruction of Syrian cities.

Early writings of orientalists loosely use the title 'Islamic guild' to refer to any form of artisans or trade organisation in the middle east.¹ In the current literature, however, the term is better defined and allocated to specific periods, such as the early Seljuk or Ottoman, during which the presence of artisan formations was financially and socially effective.² The term guild is a translation of many Arabic names of artisan's groups such as *esnaf*, *sinf*, *hirfa* and *tā'ifa*. The latter was the most used in Syria, literally meaning grouping, describing not only artisans but also religious, racial and social groups. The socio-economic aspects of the guild in the history of the Middle East are studied in detail. Current scholarship dives in micro cases of primary resources to look at the economic, religious and social diversity in artisans' societies. Scrutinising the same sources from an architectural viewpoint to find construction-related data could enhance our understanding of how artist-builders related to their cities and forms of authorities.

There are fewer sources to firmly describe if and how artisans grouped before the fifteenth century.³ Guilds as a medium and regulator of work are believed to have no substantial existence in pre-Ottoman eras where the production was simpler, the population was smaller, and governing was more centralised. The supervisor of trade *al Muhtasib* controlled the crafts regulations and was responsible for the quality of goods and work.⁴ In construction trades, *al Muhtasib* supervised only materials and dimensions of walls, and design or urban related matters was out of his concerns. However, during the ruling of the Seljuk dynasty in Anatolia, some forms of social or labour organisations did exist. *Akhi*, which comes from Arabic 'my brother-brotherhood', was an organisation where merchants met, artisans trained and the youth volunteered. The combination of the three makes *Akhi* closer to a society than to a mere guild.⁵ The influence of such corporation is evident in Ottoman guilds and Sufi groups. Both shared similar structures and ceremonial

¹For early writing about guilds see Massignon, 'La Structure Du Travail À Damas En 1927'; Lewis, 'The Islamic Guilds'.

²Baer, 'Guilds in Middle Eastern History'.

³Baer.

⁴Rafeq, 'Craft Organization, Work Ethics, and the Strains of Change in Ottoman Syria'.

⁵Amakis, 'Futuwwa Traditions in the Ottoman Empire Akhis, Bektashi Dervishes, and Craftsmen'.

habits that can be traced to the ones in *Akhi* organisations. Also, being mainly formed by immigrant artisans who came from Central Asia to Anatolia, *Akhi* had a close affiliation with moving artisans from different cultures of construction.⁶ Moving artisans were also part of the Ottoman guild, specifically in construction trades. *Akhi* corporations paved the way to a knowledge exchange in building trades that continued during the successive dynasties in Syria,⁷ such as the Ayyubid and Mamluk.⁸

Unlike crafts organisations before the fifteenth-century formations, Ottoman guilds and crafts, including the ones in Syria, are studied and documented in many sources. Writings of historians or travellers, court documents and documents from High Advisory Council and Ottoman Imperial Orders give a clear understanding of the substantial role of Ottoman guilds in the Damascene society. The organisations to which artisans belonged functioned as regulators of the production process, quality, tax collection systems and legislations. Moreover, it was through the guild that the concept of skill and mastery was defined and craftsmen complied with the rules for training and employment. Training had various structures in different guilds, but there were always three typical levels: apprentice (*al-ajir* or *al-mubtadi*), journeyman (*al-sani*) and master (*al-mu'allim*) (Fig. 8.1). For a journeyman to become a master, he needed, after the blessing from the guild masters, the financial ability to become independent. The ability was conditioned by having a place to work (*khiliu*), and the equipment (*gedik*), both formed part of the guild's monopoly, but they also contributed to demand and production balance.⁹ Guild masters selected the head of the guild (*al-shaykh*) before presenting him to the city judge (*al-qadi*) for a symbolic approval. Finally, all guilds had the head of guilds (*shaykh al-mashayekh*) who had a religious and cultural significance rather than an administrative one.¹⁰

⁶Wolper, *Cities and Saints* 75.

⁷Kuban, *The Miracle of Divrigi*.

⁸Meinecke, 'Mamluk Architecture, Regional Architectural Tradition: Evolutions and Interrelations'.

⁹Baer, 'Guilds in Middle Eastern History'; Hanna, *Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early-Modern Capitalism (1600–1800)*.

¹⁰Rafeq, 'Craft Organization, Work Ethics, and the Strains of Change in Ottoman Syria'; Baer, 'Guilds in Middle Eastern History'.



Fig. 8.1 Damascus-Sword Maker circa 1900, the pictures show the three levels of mastery: apprentice, journeyman, master. *Source* Library of Congress. USA

8.2 The Guild of Builders in Damascus 1850–1900

To understand the work of traditional master builders in Damascus, I examined two writings about craftsmanship and guilds in Damascus, both written during the late Ottoman Empire, shortly after the reforms (*Tanzimat*) 1839–1876, known for aiming to centralise the ottoman governmental apparatus. During this period, crafts were about to be in competition against industrialisation, the reforms were finding their way to implementation, and guilds and courts were giving up their planning roles to city councils (*Baladiyat*).¹¹

The first writing is *Qamus al-ṣinaʿat al-Shamiyya* (Dictionary of Damascene Crafts) by Mohammad Said al-Qasimi who started his research in 1892. In 1900, al-Qasimi died and his son Jamal al Din al Qasimi and son in law Khalil Al Azem continued the work until the completion, which has no exact dates. Louis Massignon incorporated the book into scholarship and used it for his research about

¹¹City councils law was initiated in Damascus in 1876.

crafts in Damascus in 1927.¹² The dictionary is an ‘encyclopaedic paper’ that sheds light on the Damascene crafts—al-Qasimi wandered around counting workers and enquiring about professions in the city of Damascus. The second is the essay of Elias Qoudsi ‘*Nubdha tarikhyya fil hiraf al Dimashqiyya*’ known as ‘Notice sur les Corporations de Damas’, presented in 1883¹³ in the sixth International Congress of Orientalists in Leide. It is another fieldwork piece that focuses on the life of crafts and trades traditions, habits and ceremonies. Both writings show that the definition of the guild of builders and its relationship to the state master builder, court and architects is too complicated to be framed as just another group of artisans in the city.

While working on al-Qasimi’s text, I noticed that he uses the book of Ibn Khaldun in ‘Al Muqaddimah’.¹⁴ Al-Qasimi chooses some of Ibn Khaldun’s text on building crafts and edits it to comply with the context of Damascus, i.e. the techniques and materials in Damascus.¹⁵ This extensive quotation makes the al-Qasimi’s contribution questionable, but the fact that he adopts some parts of the texts and changed other parts to fit his fieldwork research could make the original version of Ibn Khaldun also valid in Damascus 1880s. Under the umbrella of the guild of builders al-Qasimi places different building trades techniques like brickwork, stonework and rammed earth construction, which he explains in later sections as independent crafts (Table 8.1).

So what is a builder in Al Qasimi dictionary? In addition to the required technical knowledge, a builder is someone who can use this knowledge to solve contested matters in the city. ‘... these matters are clear only to those who know construction in all its details. They can judge these details by looking at the joints and ties and the wooden parts....’¹⁶ The builder is a reference to building regulations. ‘The authorities often have recourse to the opinions of these men, about construction matters which they understand better’ in a context with technical and social complexity, where people ‘compete with each other for space and air above and below and for the use of the outside of a building’. A builder is, therefore, a problem solver who mediates between neighbours about rights of access and privacy. Indeed, some court records show that builders experience were essential in solving such conflicts between neighbours.¹⁷

Likewise, the text of Elias Qoudsi has a small passage that is worth further attention. ‘The guild of builders and stone masons, who are all Christians, have no

¹²al-Qasimi, al-Qasimi, and al-Azm, *Dictionary of Damascene Crafts (Qamus Al-Sina‘at Al-Shamiyya)* 26.

¹³Qoudsi, *Notice sure les Corporations de Damas (Nubdha tarikhyya fil hiraf al Dimashqiyya)*.

¹⁴Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah* 320.

¹⁵For example, Al Qasimi does not quote Ibn Khaldun text on reed and mud construction for barns and houses, which is seen more in Iraq and Egypt than in Central Syria.

¹⁶al-Qasimi, al-Qasimi, and al-Azm, *Dictionary of Damascene Crafts (Qamus Al-Sina‘at Al-Shamiyya)*. 52. Author’s translation.

¹⁷Abu Salim, *Crafts Corporations in Damascus 1700–1750 (al Asnaf w al Tawaif al Herafyyieh fi Madenit Dimashq 1700–1750)* 259.

Table 8.1 Building crafts as described in the Dictionary of Damascene Crafts of al Qasimi. Light grey hatched crafts are both mentioned in the Builders craft (dark grey) and as an independent craft

Name of Trade-Craft	Name in Arabic		Type of Trade
Lime burner	أتوني	Atuni	Supplying
Clay worker	تراب	Tarrab	Supplying
Builder	بناء- معماري	Banna'- Mi'mari	Building
Plaster worker	جباسيني	Jabasini	Supplying
Stone extractor	حجار	Hajjar	Supplying
Rammed earth builder	دكاك	Dakkak	Building
Painter-decorator	دهان	Dahhan	Building
Wall washing worker	حوار	Hauwar	Building
Brick worker	طواب	Tauwab	Building
Mortar worker	طيان	Tayyan	Building
Mortar mixer	مجارفي	Majarfi	Building
Unskilled labour	فاعل	Fa'el	Building
Plumper	قساطلي	Qasatli	Building
Surveyor	مساح	Massah	Supplying
Engineer	مهندس	Muhandess	Supplying

initiation and they have no relation with Sheikh al-Mashaiekh. They appoint their own masters as Sheikhs and make their own regulations ... a new president is appointed every three months. I was given to the effect that ...they used to be initiated but later escaped from the authority of sheikh al Maskhaiekh.¹⁸

Based on the two texts, it could be argued that the guild of builders, unlike any other guild, had a specific relationship with the state. This specificity is evident in court records in Damascus that do not call the head of this guild by *al-shaykh* as in other guilds, but they name this position as *mimar bashi*.¹⁹ This position was not inherited within families, and the *mimar bashi* was not a member of the guild himself, he was placed by the orders from the government.²⁰ Court records also show that there were two other important positions in the builders' guild. The guild master builder (*mu'allim*) who helped the *mimar bashi*, and masters from outside the guild *Kalfa*, a word from the Arabic origin *Khailfa* that means vicar. Although it

¹⁸Qoudsi, *Notice sure les Corporations de Damas (Nubdha tarikhiyya fil hiraf al Dimashqiyya)* 59.

¹⁹Rafeq, 'Aspects of Crafts Organisation in Bilad Al Sham during the Ottoman Era (Mathaher Men Al Tantheem Al Herafi Fi Bilad Al Sham Fi Al Ahd Al Othmani)'.

²⁰Abu Salim, *Crafts Corporations in Damascus 1700–1750 (al Asnaf w al Tawaif al Herafiyieh fi Madenit Dimashq 1700–1750)*.

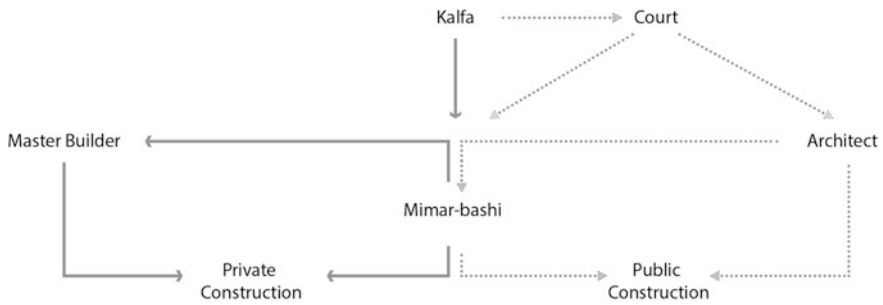


Fig. 8.2 Guild of builders construction model

is not explicitly mentioned in the case of Damascus, the term *Kalfa* in Northern Ottoman cities refers to moving artisans who wander around the empire for public and private commissions.²¹

The *mimar bashi* was not just a master builder; but neither was he a state architect. Ottoman state Architects were trained in the facilities of the army.²² A look at the structure of the guild of builders unfolds the relationship between the two. On the one hand, the administration in the guild, headed by the *mimar bashi*, facilitated private construction and housing rehabilitation projects in a non-centralised fashion—architects were not needed, and urban planning per se was an in-situ procedure. On the other hand, through this same organisational system the *mimar bashi* recruited and contracted master builders for governmental and public projects led by state architects. The combination of governmental and popular collaboration could accommodate public and private construction by using the same builders, crafts and materials.²³

Thus, we are facing two roles in building trade, namely the architect and the master builder; the first as synthesisers and visionaries, and the second as problem solvers. The first is related to governmental and public projects, and the second to residential and public buildings. The training in the first is institutionalised; whilst in the second is based on craftsmanship values. The guild is the place where these two roles meet (Fig. 8.2).

²¹Cerasi, 'Late-Ottoman Architects and Master Builders'.

²²Cerasi.

²³Abu Salim, *Crafts Corporations in Damascus 1700–1750 (al Asnaf w al Tawaif al Herafyyieh fi Madenit Dimashq 1700–1750)*.

8.3 The End of the Guild: Transformations in the Role of Master Builders

Thirty years after Qoudsi's essay in *Liede*, the guild of builders in Syria ceased to function.²⁴ The two roles of master builders and state architects were unified in the person of the modern architect—architecture is then a recognised profession with a different line of education than that of guild training or military establishments. Planning was shifted from the hands of the builders to the table of legislative entities. However, the end of guilds was not a sudden systematic giving up to machines. There was an important transitional period of adaptation and experimentation.²⁵ What is considered an acute change to Westernisation in architecture and urban planning in the last twenty years of the Ottoman rule in Damascus is an example of continuity in building construction. Western Architects, with their institutional education and 'modern' references had to work with local builders and materials which led to introducing or inventing new and different techniques such as roofing systems or façade stonework.²⁶ However, things were very different on popular construction level; it is in this period that the first dichotomy cracked between artisans and the city. Without the guild of builders, no institution could channel, agent or even acknowledge private construction. The term unplanned surfaced in planning—the French planner René Danger noted some of 'spontaneously built' areas and responded to them by creating 'non-aedificandi' zone.²⁷ Since then, the official representation to this type of private construction was by their 'illegality'. Building craftsmen were no longer seen as problem solvers but possible threats.

The second dichotomy came later, and it was by prohibiting the use of traditional materials for new construction in Syria. Before the use of concrete, unplanned areas around the wall of Damascus were integrated parts of the old city. The same materials and structural language were used in restoration, popular and architect-led projects. Until only recently, scholars categorised those unplanned areas, the *meidan*, for example, as part of the Ottoman expansion plans.²⁸

The cement construction started at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1929, Damascus inaugurated the first cement factory in its outskirts.²⁹ The state played a major role in advocating reinforced concrete as the only building material. In 1925, buildings were restricted to stone and bricks for safety and hygiene

²⁴Daghman, 'Mud Building Architecture in Damascus Region, Analysis and Documentation Study (Amaret Al Abnyeh al Tinyeh fe Iqleem Dimashq- Diraset Tauthiqiyye Tahliliyye)' 21.

²⁵Hanna, *Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early-Modern Capitalism (1600–1800)* 154–188.

²⁶Daghman, 'Mud Building Architecture in Damascus Region, Analysis and Dumentation Study (Amaret Al Abnyeh al Tinyeh fe Iqleem Dimashq- Diraset Tauthiqiyye Tahliliyye)' 44.

²⁷Etienne, 'Mukhalafat in Damascus: The Form of an Informal Settlement'.

²⁸Etienne.

²⁹The cement factory was also a benchmark in the syndical movement in Syria. Workers in the factory were pioneers in forming a modern syndicate to claim their rights.

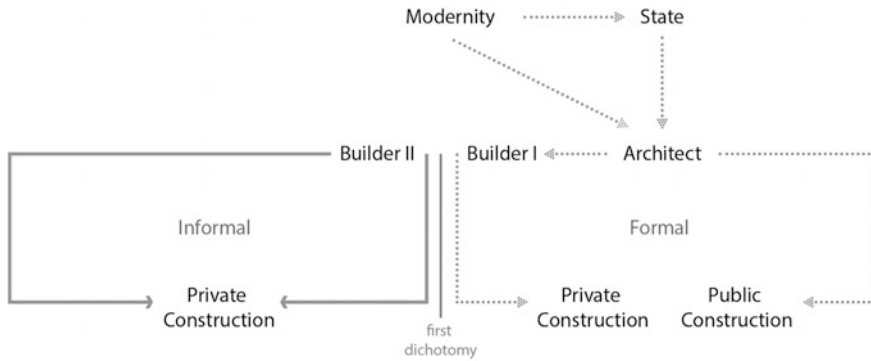


Fig. 8.3 Transitional period|construction model

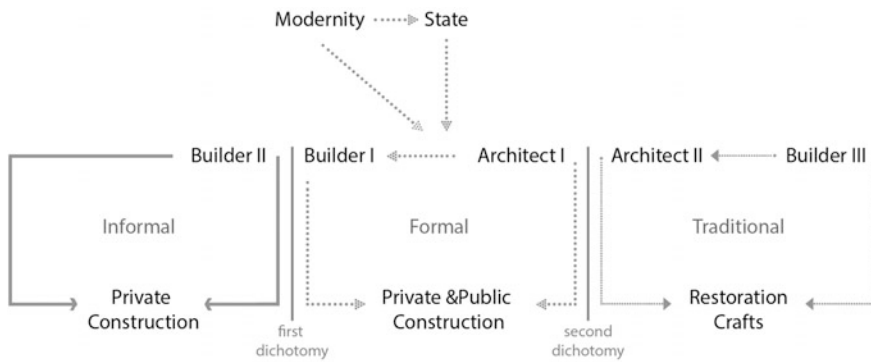


Fig. 8.4 Current construction model

reasons.³⁰ Reinforced concrete continued to be the building material during and after the French mandate. In 1976, wood and mud bricks were prohibited in Damascus region. The use of traditional materials gradually ceased in Damascus.³¹ It was the formal construction that changed the material in the informal construction. Construction workers started to use reinforced concrete for its availability, and traditional crafts with traditional materials took its final refuge in restoration projects in old cities. Figures 8.3 and 8.4 present schematic construction models from the transitional period to the current practice.

³⁰Daghman, ‘Mud Building Architecture in Damascus Region, Analysis and Dumentation Study (Amaret Al Abnyeh al Tinyeh fe Iqleem Dimashq- Diraset Tauthiqiyye Tahliliyye)’ 51.

³¹Daghman 59.

8.4 Building Crafts and Trades in Today's Construction

The result of the two dichotomies of materials and representation constitutes the modern construction in Syrian cities. Craftsmen with traditional methods and techniques, such as masonry and brickwork, work on restoration projects. Their work is marginal, isolated and mummified.³² And the quality of their crafts is deteriorating. Crafts in general are seen as tourists' leisure.³³ The case of construction crafts, in particular, is less promising, and recent calls to revive and document craftsmanship did not include any of the construction-related crafts or was only concerned about decorative ones.³⁴

But there is another extension to the traditional builders' remit beyond restoration: the building of informal settlements, the model of the mediator in a complex social context, informal agreements of privacy, and accessibility rights for its residence. This model follows structural and design regulations for maximum spans, rooms arrangement and natural light access. Popular builders advise families on how to divide lands to build in their farmlands. They are also consulted when an already built area is being densified and houses are being divided or rearticulated. Popular builders use ordinary materials available in the market. When the formal sector of construction was mainly building with cement, suppliers of traditional materials stopped trading and cement and steel prevailed in both formal and informal construction.

The difference between the modern builder and the builders in the guild is in the agency. Unlike the guild builders, present-day ones have no formal representation with the centralised authorities. The relationship between the two is not pronounced and involves bribes and connections.³⁵ The construction of a house in an informal settlement is based on temporarily blinded-eye methods, where authorities give only a few days to the builder to finish the main structure of the house, i.e. the roof and walls. Speed in construction is now one of, if not the most important skill a builder should have.³⁶

What once was a regulated contest between the state and the builder, is now an open one. Planners in Damascus, since Rene Danger, treat informal settlements as large already built areas and 'urban facts' that pops up out of the blue. Planning happens on massive scales in informal settlements, with micro interference that recognises the popular builder is limited.

³²Abed, 'Traditional Building Trades and Crafts in Changing Socio-Economic Realities and Present Aesthetic Values' 73.

³³The official governmental sponsor and supporter of craft in Syria is the Ministry of Tourism. See The Syria Time, 'Tourism Ministry'.

³⁴See the list of the intangible cultural heritage in Syria by the Syrian Trust for development <http://ich-syr.org/>.

³⁵Etienne, 'Mukhalafat in Damascus: The Form of an Informal Settlement'.

³⁶Etienne.

8.5 Discussion: Artisans and Master Builders to Rebuild Syrian Cities

Further research in guild literature is open for architects and planners. In this paper, the model of the guild of the builder in the late Ottoman empire in Damascus is drawn up through focusing on two texts from that period and crossing them with guild research on Ottoman courts documents. The model is a speculative proposal that needs further verification. However, what is interesting about the Ottoman guild of builders is that, despite its authoritarian structure as a guild, it is inclusive to different types of building practice, it deals with planning conflicts of neighbours—with other neighbours and the state by both in situ applications and courts orders. It is also inclusive to both private and public construction, local and foreign building techniques.

Since 2011, the conflict in Syria resulted in an extreme destruction of cities, in historical and modern centres, rural and urban areas. The unfortunate destruction of the traditional building has brought with it a possibility to re-link local materials to popular building practice. The restoration of the vaulted souk in Aleppo, for example, has raised a possibility to learn about and use vaults in new housing projects. The question of how those two processes could be interlaced is an extremely valid question. How could the traditional crafts used in restoration projects be effective elsewhere?

Despite all the efforts to control the construction in Damascus, around 40% of its built environment is built by popular builders with minimum, if any, intervention from architects or planners. Architects are not the primary key players in this production and, in some cases, are completely absent. During the conflict, the illegal construction in those areas almost doubled, taking advantage of the absence of authorities.

8.5.1 *The Master Builder*

By looking at building practice of the guild structures and how it was dissolved during modernisation, informal settlements refrain from being a phenomenon or an urban fact that comes with modernity. Instead, it becomes a continuation of the private construction sector in the guild but in a hostile context of laws and material market.

It is impossible to have an exact reproduction of guilds in today's modern forms of governance; a recovery of the master builder is nonetheless still possible. The reconstruction of the destroyed areas in Syria has to open up to informal building experience. In such a delicate phase, there is a genuine need in not only planning nor in brute force labour but also in the multidisciplinary of labour that can respond to different social and technical context.

8.5.2 Training

Popular builders are no longer considered as artisans, but they still have apprentices and journeymen in an informal training that challenges the institutional vocational education provided by the state. The difference between the skilled and the unskilled labour in such a context is not about the work of the hand and the perfection of the work, the unskilled informal builder becomes skilled only when he or she can respond and take decisions about complex and changing challenges such as dividing lands and expanding houses. It is also true that such a builder can only be independent when he can secure a specific set of techniques to avoid or accommodate the obstacles posed by planning and state authorities.

8.5.3 Knowledge Exchange

Another important role to recover from the guild builder is that of Kalfa, the moving artisans. Syria is neighbours with areas and cultures with similar rich building traditions. A research into what construction crafts could be transferred from those cultures is very much needed and is the extension of this paper. Technology transfer had an important role not only on the style and trends of architecture in the Middle East but also in developing new structural vocabularies and construction habits. It is by the time materials were transferred instead of knowledge that the building practice become generic, standardised, causing amnesia that raises important questions about identities Middle Eastern Cities.

Returning to building crafts and local materials in times of crisis is not new. During the sanctions on Syria in the 1980s, a severe shortage of steel in the market drove the construction market to find alternative solutions. Builders and architects in the formal sector looked at other types of roof structures on load bearing walls and vaults were adopted. The Military Housing Corporation representing a state construction organisation, built several vaulted housing projects in Damascus and Aleppo.³⁷ There were no such craftsmen as vault makers in Syria, but the Military Housing Corporation worked as a 'master builder' by conducting experiments, tests and samples of brick-vaulted house. Today's technology in structure and materials fabrication is more master builder-friendly. Systems of knowledge sharing, training and manufacturing are also rapidly advancing.

The artisan work on construction and its future role in rebuilding Syria is, therefore, about the holistic role of the master builder. This path can be taken not by training labour to be skilled only, but also to train the architect to be skilled builders.

³⁷Abed, 'Traditional Building Trades and Crafts in Changing Socio-Economic Realities and Present Aesthetic Values' 36.

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