

# The fragmentary production of knowledge on cultural heritage on the Arab world: *From an orientalist vision to a scarce engagement with epistemological and theoretical spheres*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to attempt to provide a critical assessment of the trajectory and nature of the production of knowledge on cultural heritage on the Arab world. This evaluation of the discipline or field of cultural heritage will focus on both a historic evolution and on current practices in order to understand the nature and politics of that evolution.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The approach and research methodology adopted for this paper depends primarily on a long-term critical literature review and content analysis that took place over the past 25 years concerning key reports, journal articles, books and other publications on cultural heritage on the Arab world.

**Findings** – The paper's main findings centers on presenting current practices/production on cultural heritage which are divided into two categories in terms of production of knowledge: an abundant engagement with a technical sphere dominated with concern for documentation and conservation technology of cultural heritage; and a scarce engagement with epistemological and theoretical spheres that delves into processes of cultural heritage definition, consumption and continuity in the Arab world.

**Originality/value** – The paper attempts to engage in and commence a much-needed wider discussion on the historical transformation concerning knowledge production on cultural heritage in the Arab world and its related practices and processes. The paper emphasizes the significance of this engagement with theoretical spheres of conservation and calls for an expansion of such engagement in order to elevate the discourse and debate on cultural heritage in the Arab world.

**Keywords** Knowledge production, Cultural heritage, Architectural heritage, Arab world

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The meaning and definition of cultural heritage have been evolving through time. Choay (1992) believes that heritage is no longer considered to be a static set of objects with fixed meaning, but a social process (a construct) through which any human artifact/site can be deliberately invested with memorial function and incorporated in the definition of heritage. The notion of cultural heritage emerged as a preoccupation of scholars and researchers in Europe only recently during the 18th and 19th centuries (Choay, 1992; Daher and Maffi, 2014, pp. 13–14) and developed into a state-centered enterprise during the 20th century, especially with the natural birth of nation-states in Europe (Anderson, 1991) and their subsequent invention in the Arab region (Daher, 2007).

Driven by a clear conviction of the need to present a historical evolution and transformation concerning the production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world, the paper presents three significant trajectories and transformation. First, it presents



early beginnings of that transformation were dominated by an Orientalist vision and discourse during the colonial period. The paper then presents the second phase of that trajectory during the postcolonial period and the emergence of nation-states when the Orientalist discourse was later on perpetuated by practices of cultural heritage during early nation-statehood periods in the Arab world. The early nation-statehood period centered on self-realization and the discovery of the vernacular. Then, the paper presents the third phase of that trajectory by researching contemporary practices of cultural heritage that could be divided into two categories in terms of production of knowledge: (1) an abundant engagement with a technical sphere dominated by a concern for documentation and technology of cultural heritage conservation and (2) a scarce engagement with epistemological and theoretical spheres that delves into processes of cultural heritage definition, consumption and continuity in the Arab world. The second category is orchestrated by an emerging group of actors and agents on cultural heritage ranging from individual researchers to research centers including urban activists and heritage practitioners.

### **Early beginnings and a dominant orientalist vision on cultural heritage in the Arab world**

In order to understand the nature of the production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world, one needs to research moments of transformation and rarity that the Arab region has witnessed over the two centuries, such as the destruction of a dynastic religious realm (the Ottoman Empire) and its replacement by the various post-mandate and postcolonial nation-states of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Tunis, Morocco, Algiers, Kuwait and several others during the second half of the 20th century; with consequences on the definition and practices of nationhood and heritage (Daher, 2007, pp. 2–4).

The work of Edward Said in general, and *Orientalism* (1979) in particular, will help us understand such processes of constructing or registering a specific “Orient” in the minds of Europeans, citizens of the Arab nation-states, and the world at large. The production of knowledge on the cultural heritage during the colonial period was mainly dominated by European scholars who worked on the systematic documentation of archaeological and some selective heritage sites all over the Arab world. Such production of knowledge, which took the form of surveys, paintings, travel literature and production of measured drawings for example, could be explained as a mechanism of inscription of a particular “ancient heritage” that concentrated on biblical and archaeological heritage of the distant past while marginalizing the recent Ottoman past and presence in the Arab region manifested in urban and rural sites alike. Examples include the travel writings of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt in Egypt, Syria and the Holy Land (Burckhardt, 2018), and Gottlieb Schumacher’s travel writings and documentation and mapping of ancient sites in Jordan and the Hauran Valley (Schumacher, 2010). A key noteworthy publication is the series of volumes entitled *Description de l’Égypte* (English: Description of Egypt) which were a series of publications that started in the early 19th century and continued until 1892. These volumes centered on documenting ancient Egypt and the River Nile as well as its natural history. It was a collaborative work of hundreds of civilian scholars, artists and scientists who accompanied Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt in 1798 [1].

Later on, and toward the beginning of the 20th century, the production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world was dominated by several research campaigns and documentation projects that centered on documenting various archaeological and heritage sites in different Arab countries and were influenced by a dominant Orientalist discourse and vision. Yet, these documentations are extremely valuable today, as they represent in many cases the only evidence of a scholarly documentation of the cultural landscape in the Arab world from the early 20th century. Such publications included the work of the architectural

historian Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell who in the first half of the 20th century produced ample work that documented the ancient and medieval cultural heritage in the Arab World (Creswell, 1958); the studies and architectural documentations and sketches of the French scholar Jean Sauvaget together with the local Damascene architect Khaled Moaz on Damascus and other significant cities of Syria (Sauvaget, 1942); the work of François Vigier for example on Jerusalem (Vigier, 1955); and numerous reports and books on the description of classical archaeological sites in the Levant and North Africa.

This explains the dominant focus on archaeology (*ATHAR* in Arabic) in the practices of cultural heritage in many of the Arab nation-states, and the particular bias in the definition of cultural heritage mentioned earlier. Many archeological museums that housed examples of classical archaeology flourished in many Arab cities, and they concentrated on such classical (mostly Greco-Roman) collections with scarce and minimal representation of the cultural heritage of the recent past or even the vernacular. Examples included national museum in cities such as Beirut, Damascus, Amman, Baghdad and Cairo, to mention a few. In most countries of the Arab world, nation-states' policies related to culture influenced practices of heritage definition and production manifested in several practices such as in education (e.g., curricula books) and cultural production (e.g., practices of ministries of culture or tourism). These practices tended to perpetuate previous Orientalist discourses:

One only has to look at any tourism brochure or poster, or watch any promotional video that defines and promotes each of the countries within the Middle East to find out that practices of governments in the region through their ministries of tourism work to define the region mainly through its classical traditions marginalizing local regional realities of the recent past in particular. One example comes from Jordan Tourism Board brochures where sites such as Petra and Jerash are still the highlights of any tourism trip coming to Jordan; only recently very little attention is directed to promoting Jordan's more recent heritage realities such as agricultural villages in the north, the vernacular, and urban and social heritage of various Jordanian towns such as Salt or Amman. (Daher, 2007, p. 9)

Yet, it is important to observe that within this overemphasis on the ancient past and on a limited definition of what heritage is emerged significant works that attempted to grant voice to the vernacular in the Arab world such as the writings of Cannan (1932-3) on the Palestinian Arab house, or Hassan Fathy's fascination with traditional peasant Egyptian vernacular and its adaptation into contemporary application and architecture (Fathy, 1973).

One important marginalized reality was the urban heritage of several newly emerging cities in the region such as Amman, Kuwait, Manama and Masqat in the Arab east (*the Mashreq*), and Tripoli and Casablanca in the Arab west (*the Maghreb*), to mention a few. The urban heritage of these cities, as an example, was not incorporated into the formal definition of heritage, or even into local practices of cultural heritage (e.g., tourism, cultural events, conservation). For example, the urban heritage of Amman, dating to the first half of the 20th century, was discredited by Orientalist/academic discourses that rendered it as insignificant and marginal (Daher, 2008, pp. 38–40). The Orientalist discourse had constructed stereotypical models and typologies of what an "Islamic" or "Arab" city should look like; and the urban heritage of many of these cities were disregarded and were not included in the formal definition of national heritage. Consequently, the application of such models on cities like Amman, Kuwait or Casablanca becomes very problematic, particularly when such cities are compared and contrasted with others like Damascus, Cairo or Jerusalem, which more or less fit the constructed stereotypical model (Daher and Maffi, 2014, pp. 5–6). One of the early scholars to criticize the stereotypical and monolithic model based on a body of literature produced by Western Orientalists was the renowned scholar Janet Abu-Lughod (1987, p. 155). According to her, such generalizations were built on limited examples, mainly Fez in North Africa and Damascus and Aleppo in the Levant (locally known as *Bilad al-Sham*).

**Nation building, self-realization and the discovery of the local vernacular**

After the creation of nation-states in the Arab world, and even in other parts of the world, and with cultural and socioeconomic transformations into post-modernism toward the middle of the 20th century (Harvey, 1990), the field of cultural heritage witnessed the emergence of a predominant narrative in the production of knowledge centering on self-realization and the discovery of the vernacular. It is important to situate such transformations in the production of knowledge on cultural heritage as part of projects of nation building (Anderson, 1991). In many countries in the Arab world, this was manifested by numerous projects that centered on the search for local/national specificities – a search for national heritage. Therefore, and after the second half of the 20th century, one notices the flourishing of several manuscripts and publications on vernacular architecture and its conservation. Prominent examples include the work of Ragette (1974) on researching traditional architecture in Lebanon in an attempt to construct a typology for that architecture. Also, other examples include the work of Warren and Fathi (1982) on documenting and researching the cultural heritage of Baghdad that is represented in its traditional houses.

Political independence, which for several Arab states coincided with the end of the Second World War, marked the beginning of a new phase in the process and practices related to cultural heritage in the region. As several scholars have noted, this period was characterized by the postcolonial states' attempts to build specific national identities, which were to become the common reference for the independent populations (Al-Sayyad, 2001). It is important to situate such shifts in the production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world as part of a global cultural transformation from modernity to post-modernity with a growing interest in local traditions and the vernacular. Yet, it is also important to situate such transformations as well as part of national projects of legitimization and construction.

Arab nationalism, the dominant ideology in the region, brought about the “discovery” or the fabrication of turath sha’bi, that is folklore or popular traditions. Numerous Arab countries witnessed the emergence of a strong concern for popular cultural heritage, deemed the “authentic” expression of the Arab essence which was to define these modern societies: costumes, objects and handicrafts, as well as songs, poetry and various oral traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were collected as valuable items legitimizing the postcolonial nation state. Government and private institutions promoted the publication of books and journals devoted to popular traditions, folkloric museums and archives aimed at preserving tangible and intangible heritage were founded, university departments of folkloric studies were inaugurated, and so on. (Daher and Maffi, 2014, p. 21)

Mechanisms for such a construction included several discursive practices set up by different institutions of the state, such as ministries of education, culture and tourism, and ranged from school curricula to postage-stamps, museums, the promotion of tourism and other areas of representation (Katz, 2005; Maffi, 2005).

**Contemporary practices and categories of production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world today**

This section of the paper will attempt to look at the contemporary production of knowledge on the cultural heritage in the Arab world. Today, one could categorize the engagement with cultural heritage into two main trajectories: (1) a technical sphere dominated by a concern for documentation and technology of cultural heritage conservation and (2) an epistemological and theoretical sphere concerned with the politics of cultural heritage definition and place making, and an engagement with the evolution and critical transformation of international dogma of cultural heritage. But the engagement with this epistemological sphere on the production of knowledge on cultural heritage is scarce and limited. Yet, it is very interesting to notice the emergence of various new actors and agents such as research centers and urban

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and heritage activists involved in the second category of production of knowledge on cultural heritage addressing issues of politics of cultural heritage definition and place making while also contesting certain neoliberal approaches to the development of public spaces and heritage sites.

#### *Abundant engagement with a technical sphere*

Today, and based on analysis of the nature of publications and research on cultural heritage in the Arab world, one can infer that most of that production can be categorized within a technical sphere that is concerned with documentation of the cultural heritage and also with the pathology and technologies of heritage conservation mechanisms (e.g., methods of digital recording), pathology and technology in the form of state of conservation reporting, diagnosis and evaluation.

Key works within the last couple of decades that centered on documentation of the cultural heritage included [Amiry and Tamari \(1989\)](#) on the documentation of Palestinian village houses and [Khammash \(1986\)](#) on documenting the rural/vernacular cultural heritage of Jordan. Furthermore, some of these significant documentary projects take on a case study approach of a particular period or era such as the growing interest in the study of Ottoman and Mamluk cultural heritage in the Arab world. Examples include the works of Moaz on Ottoman Damascus (1985, 1989, and 1995), [Al-Harithy on Mamluk Tripoli \(2005b\)](#) and [Hawker \(2008\)](#) on the traditional architecture of the Arabian Gulf; [Kay and Zandi \(1991\)](#) on the architectural heritage of the Gulf region; [Kafescioglu \(1999\)](#) on Ottoman Aleppo and Damascus; [Behrens Abouseif \(2007\)](#) on Mamluk Cairo; the works of Damluji on Oman (1998) and on Yeman (2008). Noteworthy also is [Weber's \(2009\)](#) critical and multidisciplinary research on Ottoman Modernity in Damascus. It is interesting to notice that such documentations, produced by architects, architectural historians, anthropologists or archaeologists, constitute an important body of knowledge that eliminates the boundaries (in most cases) between architectural and social sciences leading to a better anthropological/historical understanding of that cultural heritage and of the places under investigation.

Another group of publications center on projects of conservation of the cultural heritage, and in most cases adopt a technical sphere in explaining processes of restoration and conservation, or diagnosis and evaluation of the state of conservation of particular case studies and sites; or heritage protection and management at individual singular building or at urban levels. Examples are numerous and include the edited volume on the preservation of Egypt's cultural heritage ([Danforth, 2010](#)), various publications on conservation projects of the cultural heritage in Palestine by Riwaq (the Center for Architectural Conservation), the work of several Agha Khan publication on urban conservation and adaptive reuse (Agha Khan Program for Islamic Architecture 1993) addressing urban conservation and technologies of conservation in various Arab cities such as Fes, Jeddah, Baghdad and others as well.

#### *Scarce engagement with epistemological and theoretical spheres*

Another contemporary genre of production on cultural heritage in the Arab world is concerned with an epistemological and theoretical investigation addressing the politics and practices of cultural heritage in the Arab world and engagement with the evolution and critical transformation of international dogma on heritage.

Most recently and toward the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, one can observe the surfacing of specific themes of engagement that critically investigate issues related the politics of definition of cultural heritage and its various processes of consumption, transformation, conservation and continuity. Such engagements are scarce and very limited in quantity, yet they constitute an important body of knowledge on cultural

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heritage in the Arab world. In order to investigate furthermore on this scarce production of knowledge on cultural heritage that is of a theoretical and epistemological nature, the article attempts to group them into five interrelated themes:

- (1) Engagement with the politics of the definition of heritage and of conservation

The definition of heritage and material culture in the Arab world and their links to place and identity construction have always been a highly politicized and contested process due to multiple juxtapositions of region and nation, and also due to other processes and mechanisms of inscription and of marginalization of such heritage as explained earlier in the paper. The material cultural heritage, conceptualized beyond the “edifice complex,” and represented in various sites, social histories, urban and rural systems of governance, family histories and intra-regional networks of relationships, is the focus of several few yet significant investigations in the Arab world today.

Important examples of such studies include (Daher, 2007) on the politics of defining the recent past in the *Mashreq* and Faroqhi on granting voice to Ottoman heritage in the Arab world (1994). Faroqhi (1994, p. 175) believes that many historians and researchers assume that events within the Ottoman Empire derive their significance only from the impact they had on developments in Europe. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, this Eurocentric and politically charged perspective marginalized urban and rural transformations and building activities in the Middle East, acting to render a whole part of the region’s history insignificant and thus having an impact on the definition of heritage and its incorporation in everyday practices.

More recently, Arab and other scholars are engaged in a paradigm shift, where the recent past is being critically reevaluated and thus recognized. Such paradigm shifts in the critical understanding of the recent past are working to reinterpret the Ottoman legacy, away from Eurocentric perspectives and even from Arab-nationalist views. One observes the emergence within the last two decades of several research journals and associations dedicated to the research and study of Ottoman history and heritage, such as the Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies (AHROS), edited and published by Abdeljelil Temimi of the University of Tunis; the Ottoman Studies Association of Beirut founded in 1986; the Centre for Turkish Studies at the University of Mosul, Iraq, founded in 1988; the Moroccan Association of Ottoman Studies, founded in 1989; and the Egyptian Centre of Ottoman Studies founded in 1990 (Barbir, 1996, pp. 108–109).

There had also been noteworthy attempts by several Arab scholars to initiate local research programs on Ottoman heritage and history in the Middle East; Mohammad Adnan al-Bakhit, for instance, had established a significant nucleus of researchers on Ottoman resources, history and politics at Al al-Bayt University in Mafrqa, Jordan. Similar attempts include the efforts of Khaled Ziyadah, of the Lebanese University in Beirut. This paradigm shift is also shared by other Western and Arab scholars in an attempt to rediscover and provide a critical analysis of the recent past. Significant works include Eugene Rogan’s on Salt, Jordan (1999) and Bishara Doumani on Jabal Nablus (1995), where he focuses on rural and urban social space and history, addressing issues related to family, culture, and regional and local trade networks, while giving a voice to local realities that have only recently become the focus of scholarly work, such as the political economy of olive oil and the production of soap in the city and their associated heritage sites. This critical investigation of the recent past is characterized by a shift from a political focus to an emphasis on the social history of these places and regions and on the politics of everyday life. This paradigm shift influenced the definition of heritage site where new sites are being incorporated into the practices of conservation and adaptive reuse such as the 19th-century *Bilad al Sham Townhouses* and sites related to the local industrial traditions (e.g., water mills, olive presses and factories of

soup production). Other related investigations engage with a more epistemological engagement with the meaning of cultural conservation and heritage in the Arab and Muslim world such as the works of [Arkoun \(1994\)](#) or [Hodjat \(1995\)](#) on the meaning of the past, and of heritage, and conservation in Islam.

Most recently, one notices the rising interest in research focusing on modern heritage in the Arab world. Modernity, as a major cultural change in the 20th century, was a period of transformation that many cities of the Arab world were affected by encompassing architecture, urban planning, cinema and literature, to mention a few. Yet, it was a very short-lived period. And today, many scholars on heritage are critically working on redefining the cultural heritage in the Arab world in order to incorporate such Arab modern heritage as part of the overall cultural heritage of the Arab nation.

Local attempts include George Arbid's documentation of the modern architecture in Beirut and the rest of the Arab world ([Arbid, 2014](#)); Daher's research on Amman's modern heritage ([Daher, 2009a](#), pp. 22–26) and adaptive reuse projects in Amman; the Bibliotheca Alexandria's efforts (under the supervision of Ismail Serrageldin) to document and understand modernity in Egypt through its quarterly publication *Thakirat Misr al Mu'asirah*; the works of Caecilia Pieri on Baghdad's modern heritage ([Pieri, 2015](#)); the documentation of Kuwait's modern architecture ([Fabbri et al., 2015](#)); the critical investigations of the historian Farah Al-Nakib of Kuwait's forgotten *golden* modern era ([2018](#)); the works of Chabbi and Mahdy on preserving Abu Dhabi's modern architecture ([Chabbi and Mahdy, 2011a, b](#)); and the efforts of the *Casamémoire* society in Casablanca to research and document its modern heritage in the city [2], to mention a few.

- (2) Transformation of heritage spaces and politics and processes of cultural heritage and public space formation

Another current important theme for research and publications on cultural heritage centers on the theories, politics and processes of heritage spaces in the Arab world. It is important to mention that since the 1990s a significant number of monographs on the topic of cultural heritage with a theoretical, analytical and exploratory perspective had been published, such as [Daher and Maffi \(2014\)](#) on the politics and practices of cultural heritage in the Arab world; [Al-Sayyad \(2001\)](#) on manufacturing heritage and consuming tradition with a focus on the Arab world; and [Meskell \(1998\)](#) on the politics of archaeology and heritage in the eastern Mediterranean region and the Middle East. Such monographs engaged with theories of heritage and in certain cases adopted a more comparative approach to the analysis.

In addition, other significant edited volumes emerged addressing the urban transformation of cities in the Arab world. Even though such volumes focus primarily on urban transformations and practices, they do genuinely inform the production of knowledge on cultural heritage from exactly that perspective as not only they present an interesting dialogue with urban cultural heritage through colonial and postcolonial periods but also extend their analysis into contemporary periods of neoliberalization and global urban restructuring as in the case of both volumes of [El-Sheshtawy \(2004, 2008\)](#) on evolving Arab cities. Others, such as the volume on public places and public spheres in Middle Eastern cities during the first half of the 20th century ([Nielsen and Skovgaard-Petersen, 2001](#)), work significantly to extend the definition and meaning of cultural heritage to incorporate different forms of public spaces and popular cultures. Others, such as the work of [Nasr and Voliat \(2003\)](#), delve into the dialectic between imported/exported models of planning, urban design and urban governmentality in the Arab city during and beyond the colonial period.

Others engage with the politics of heritage places and everyday life such as [Daher \(1999\)](#) on gentrification and the heritage industry in rural Jordan; [Copertino \(2014\)](#) on the recent practices of restoration and conservation in Damascus analyzing the various discursive

practices of different actors and agents involved in this process; and Bianca (1997) on the politics of governmental involvement in the management of architectural heritage in the Muslim world. Some scholars take on a more historical investigation concerning the evolution of cultural heritage protection in the Arab world such as the works of Alaa El-Habashi (2003) on the presentation of Egyptian cultural heritage. It is also important to mention publications on the cultural heritage discourse in the Arab world and the role played by the Agha Khan Award for architecture in the Islamic world (Hallaj, 2016).

More recently, the Arab world witnessed the creation of various research centers and various platforms for heritage and urban activism that are involved in research on the politics of place and cultural heritage, addressing issues related to the critical link between research and practice on cultural heritage and conservation in addition to the politics of public space creation in the city and contesting heritage and public space exploitation by recent neoliberal urban transformations in Arab cities. Examples include *Riwaq* [3] in Palestine who since 1991 has been involved in restoring the Palestinian collective memory through engaging in heritage research and conservation of cultural heritage in the historic cores of 50 villages in addition to various other research projects on the politics of heritage definition, public space creation and adaptive reuse of cultural heritage buildings. The *Centre for the Study of the Built Environment* (CSBE [4]) in Amman since 1999 is a nonprofit research institution working on researching the built environment and is involved in research projects on public space politics, urban agriculture, cultural heritage, in addition to community development through interactive design.

Examples also include *Public Works*, [5] a multidisciplinary research and design studio that engages critically and creatively with a number of urban and public issues in Lebanon. Since 2012, *Public Works* has been involved in research on the politics of heritage and housing in the city of Beirut, and also contesting public space and heritage exploitation by certain neoliberal development discourses and projects. The *Arab Center for Architecture* [6] in Beirut and since 2008, focused on documenting, archiving and researching Modern heritage, urban design and planning in Beirut and the rest of the Arab World. Other examples from Egypt include *Cairo Cluster* [7], a platform for urban and heritage research and design initiatives focusing on research, archiving and mapping the city, heritage studies and urban transformations. Also *Megawra* [8] in Cairo as well represents another research center with a focus on heritage conservation theory and practice; and on linking cultural heritage to sustainability and social responsibility. *Casamemoire* [9] in Casablanca focuses on documenting and conserving modern architectural heritage of the city and is involved in training, publications and conservation. Several of these research centers and their associated heritage and urban activists work on the enhancement of heritage and public spaces and their respective communities counteracting neoliberal urban restructuring while granting voice to marginalized populations such as Abir Saksouk-Sasso's brochures of *Public Works* on the politics of public space and neoliberal transformations on Beirut's water front *Dalieh* (Saksouk-Sasso, 2015).

On the other hand, other actors in the Arab world representing governmental bodies such as department of antiquities and ministries of culture and tourism (that are involved at the level of protection, planning, and management of cultural heritage) rarely engage in a critical and analytical dialogue on cultural heritage, and most meetings and symposia are directed toward bureaucratic and technological concerns and themes with very selective and few opportunities to engage with theoretical and epistemological questions on cultural heritage in the Arab world.

Dilworth and Weaver (2020) discuss how urban political form and development are shaped by ideas, interests and institutions. They explain how social groups, in order to advance their interests and ideas, form coalitions to promote certain demonstrational projects while contesting other forms of urban development. The ideas and interests of the research



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centers, actors and platforms of heritage and urban activism mentioned earlier constitute coalitions and focal points for paradigm shifts and a breaking ground for new transformations affecting Arab thought on cultural heritage and cities today.

### (3) Engagements with international heritage conservation dogma and theories

It is unfortunate that while other cultures have contributed to the international debate on issues of significance assessment of cultural heritage, or evaluation of authenticity and integrity of heritage sites over the years such as the Australian Burra Charter, the Nara document of authenticity, or concepts of integrated conservation and historic urban landscapes, the Arab world is still yet to develop its own and localized heritage charters and conventions. Yet there are of course certain exceptions; noteworthy are the engagements and dialogue created by ICCROM's *ATHAR Program on the Conservation of Cultural Heritage in the Arab Region* [10] with the rest of the international community on cultural heritage theories and conservation.

The *ATHAR* Program has succeeded since its creation in 2004 to contribute to the body of knowledge on cultural heritage conservation theory and management by producing a series of monographs on conservation of cultural heritage in the Arab region tackling significant issues related to theories and management of conservation in the Arab world. Another noteworthy publication centers on attempting to introduce the youth to heritage site management and protection (Aslan and Yaiche-Artout, 2006).

Noteworthy engagements with cultural heritage conservation theories and approaches of heritage management include Aslan's introduction to heritage theories and site management approaches (Aslan, 2013); Assi's work on researching the authenticity of cultural heritage (Assi, 2000); Lamprakos work on the politics and practices of heritage conservation and the establishment of a world heritage site in Sanaa, Yemen (Lamprakos, 2016); Daher's work on the contention between avant-garde and kitsch and notion of authenticity of the cultural heritage (2014b); the works of Khalaf (2016b) on the reconciliation of conservation of cultural heritage and the insertion of new additions to historic environments negotiating issues of compatibility and distinction vis-à-vis concepts of continuity, integrity and authenticity; and the work of Al-Harithy (2005a) on challenging and critiquing concepts of heritage preservation as currently practiced under the aegis of international agreements and UNESCO conventions.

### (4) Urban conservation and regeneration

It is encouraging that more scholars are involved in writing on concepts of integrated conservation and other issues related to politics and processes of urban heritage in the Arab world as this is a much-needed area of research due to the massive destruction and dilapidation of several historic city cores in the name of "development" and "progress." The 1980s was instrumental in the way how urban rehabilitation was considered a fundamental component of urban and local development policies. The challenge became to incorporate and infuse urban rehabilitation and local development. The 1990s were crucial for the development of urban rehabilitation in the way how planners and environmentalists confirmed the urgent need to apply the principles of sustainable development in the context of spatial planning strategies within historic urban neighborhoods; concepts of cultural landscapes emerged and then followed by concepts of historic urban landscapes (Daher, 2009b).

It is interesting to investigate why concepts of area conservation emerged much later in several cities of the Arab East than in Arab cities in the West such as in Fez, Morocco (through the work of the Agency for the Development and Rehabilitation of the City of Fez (ADER FEZ)), or in Tunis (through the work of the *Association de sauvegarde de la Médina de*

*Tunis* (ASM). Cities of the Maghreb adopted French principles of area conservation and of protected urban sectors as early as the 1970s, with projects addressing the conservation of historic city cores in these cities.

The production of knowledge on urban conservation on the Arab world is, in some cases, facilitated by donor agencies, local governmental bodies and international organizations' funded projects on urban and heritage conservation. Noteworthy is the work published by the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) on the rehabilitation of the old city of Aleppo (Sturzbecher *et al.*, 2001); the work of the Aga Khan on Cairo's historic neighborhoods' urban conservation projects (Bianca and Jodidio, 2006) or on Tunis's historic urban quarters (Serageldin and Davidson, 1996).

Other significant works also include Sedky's monograph on area conservation projects and processes in Cairo (Sedky, 2009); Daher's work on the practices of urban heritage tourism and the politics between local actors, international donors and the state in Jordan (Daher, 2005); and Hallaj's work on the politics and economics of urban conservation in Syria and Yemen (Hallaj, 2006). Most recently, one should mention the work of Hossam Mahdy (2017) on approaches to the conservation of Cairo which not only presents a historic perspective of the city's evolution and conservation efforts but also critically addresses current approaches to urban conservation through conflicting values and the conservation from the point of view of a living heritage (Mahdy, 2017, pp. 88–112).

#### (5) Cultural heritage and the development nexus

An important trajectory on the production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world is the critical link between cultural heritage and community development. This issue is gaining international significance specially when taking into consideration the current catastrophic destruction of cultural heritage in places like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya with dramatic and adverse consequences on human living conditions and dignity. Even though the link between heritage and development on the Arab world had been tackled extensively in the past addressing issues of heritage and tourism development, the heritage industry, and heritage conservation and regeneration as a mean of community development and socioeconomic enhancement, yet new engagements centering on this nexus are taking on different dimensions addressing the critical link between post-disasters and postwar reconstruction on one hand and the politics of humanitarian aid on the other.

Noteworthy are the numerous publications and monographs on cultural heritage and post-war reconstruction and conflict resolution by Sultan Barakat (2005) and Barakat and Evans (2012); the work of Al-Harithy on post-war reconstruction in Lebanon after the 2006 war (Al-Harithy, 2010); the work of Khalaf (2016a, 2018) on the reconstruction of destroyed UNESCO cultural World Heritage sites in conflict zones debating issues of outstanding universal values, reconstruction, authenticity and integrity; and the work of Fawaz on the politics of reconstruction in Haret Hriek in Beirut (Fawaz, 2014).

### Conclusion: personal reflections

This paper presented three significant trajectories and transformations on the production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world. First, it presented early beginnings of that production that were dominated by an Orientalist vision and discourse during the colonial period. Second, it presented the second trajectory during the early nation-statehood period which centered on self-realization and the discovery of the vernacular. And finally, it presented recent contemporary practices of cultural heritage that were divided into two categories in terms of production of knowledge: (1) an abundant engagement with a technical sphere dominated with concern for documentation and technology of cultural heritage conservation and (b) a scarce engagement with epistemological and theoretical spheres that

delves into processes of cultural heritage definition, consumption, and continuity in the Arab world. The second category is orchestrated by an emerging group of actors and agents on cultural heritage ranging from individual researchers to research centers including urban activists and heritage practitioners involved in a critical engagement with cultural heritage continuity and inclusive public space creation in the Arab city. These emerging individuals and groups constitute coalitions and focal points for paradigm shifts and a breaking ground for new transformations affecting Arab thought and cities today.

Recommendations in terms of future production of knowledge on cultural heritage in the Arab world center on more engagement with epistemological and theoretical concerns and issues of cultural heritage such as critical definition of heritage in the Arab world; politics of place and heritage understanding and making; engagement with the evolution and changing dogma and theory of cultural heritage; and critical links between cultural heritage and development to mention a few.

Furthermore, recommendations also include the breaking of boundaries between actors and agents involved in knowledge production on cultural heritage at two levels: (1) breaking boundaries between different disciplines “languages” that engage with heritage (e.g., architecture, social sciences, engineering, technology, management) in order for these different individuals to commence to understand the nature of how different disciplines could inform each other, and to adopt a more collaborative or supra-disciplinary approach to research and knowledge production. (2) breaking boundaries between different circles of engagement on cultural heritage at levels of: interest (e.g., academic research, activists and research centers); protection, planning and management (e.g., designation and listing by governmental bodies, donor agencies, educational and cultural institutions, museum collections); and intervention (e.g., practitioners, artists, conservation specialists). It is important that these different circles of publics start to engage in discussions amongst each other that will eventually have an impact of the nature of knowledge production on cultural heritage in and on the Arab world.

## Notes

1. The full title of the work is *Description de l'Égypte, ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française* (English: *Description of Egypt, or the collection of observations and researches which were made in Egypt during the expedition of the French Army*).
2. Newsletter of the Association de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine Architectural du XXe siècle du Maroc, at <[www.casamemoire.org](http://www.casamemoire.org)>, accessed 25 November 2010. Founded in 1995, CASAMEMOIRE is a Moroccan non-profit association working for the architectural preservation of 20th-century Morocco.
3. <https://www.riswaq.org/>
4. <http://www.csbe.org/>
5. [https://www.publicworksstudio.com/about\\_en.html](https://www.publicworksstudio.com/about_en.html)
6. <http://www.arab-architecture.org/>
7. <https://clustercairo.org/>
8. <http://megawra.com/>
9. <http://www.casamemoire.org/>
10. ICCROM is the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property which is based in Rome and ATHAR program has been established by ICCROM in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates since 2004 and focuses on the conservation of cultural heritage in the Arab region.

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### Further reading

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