

# Traveling workshop to unravel recent cultural legacy of the Levant

Researchers from 4 countries study dynamics of heritage definition, its connected public, actors, networks

**Rami Farouk Daher**  
Special to The Daily Star

AMMAN: A group of researchers from four countries is studying the dynamics of heritage definition and politics of place and their links to development within the Levant.

The research, assisted by an International Collaborative Research Grant from the Social Science Research Council's Program on the Middle East and North Africa, is concerned with socio-economic, cultural and territorial changes in historic and significant heritage sites such as neighborhoods, streets, historic buildings and other places of public gatherings.

The researchers embarked on this exceptional Traveling Workshop this past winter and covered different "sites" of investigation from all over the Levant, such as the historic neighborhood around Rainbow Street in Amman; the old neighborhood of Saruja in Damascus; the Hijaz Railroad Line Stations and infrastructure all over the Levant, and new developments and urban regeneration endeavors in various historic city cores of the Levant in Tripoli, Aleppo, Sidon and Aqaba to mention a few. One of the main objectives of the project was to understand the nature and dynamics of the various types of publics, actors, and stakeholders – such as individuals, NGOs, families, institutions – involved in the definition, production, and consumption of heritage and to unravel the various networks, communication structures and discourses operating between and within such publics and actors.

In Saruja, – a historic neighborhood in Damascus which was severely marred by "grand planning schemes" during the French Mandate era and into the 1960s and 70s – there is a "living" and extremely significant

yet marginalized part of Damascene neighborhood heritage. In the midst of "creative destructions" of French city planning and its poor imitation during the post-nation state era, not only was this significant neighborhood divided by a main highway, but many of its houses and alleys were rendered "slums" in contemporary planning maps.

The entire neighborhood had been reshaped and "modernized" on paper and was sold to shareholders. In fact some of Saruja's old buildings had been already demolished making way for "modernized" planned visions of the area. The Friends of Damascus Society has worked hard with representatives of the old neighborhood to contest the new plans for Saruja, which they claim has very high historic and social value.

While Saruja may be losing its character to poor urban planning, Aqaba, Jordan is facing an invasion of multinational companies building fancy five-star hotels and large-scale development projects.

The city's residents, from taxi drivers to shop owners, have reiterated the feeling that "the city is no longer theirs."

The "hot" and most desired places on the shore, such as popular old beach coffeehouses, public beaches, fish restaurants on the beach or even significant low-rise hotels from the mid-20th century, are all being taken over by such "first class tourism investments," as termed by one city official.

Aqaba's distinctive, yet not so recognized heritage of the 1930s and 40s represented in the Old Town with its residential houses, coffee shops and open air cinema is being completely disguised and submerged by this sweeping "grand planning" and "new vision" for the city. Although people are aware of this transformation, the ordinary cit-



The researchers walk through the historic district of Saruja

izen does not possess the right tools to contest or even mitigate such visions and investments.

In the midst of such large-scale touristic developments emerges a genuine and authentic partnership between tourism and heritage in the Levant represented by small family-owned hotels in Damascus, Aleppo, Amman and Beirut, an alternative to grand luxurious hotels.

Whether it is the Al-Rabie historic hotel located in an old Damascene courtyard house, or the Baron Hotel from early 20th century Aleppo, tourists are offered a different experi-

only adapted their old residence into the famous soap museum but are involved heavily through the Audi Foundation in urban regeneration activities in Sidon and in promoting cultural activities in the city. In Amman for example, the Abdel-Hamid Shoman Foundation not only sponsors intellectual and cultural activities, but have been extensively involved in the conservation and protection of the architectural heritage of the city through the Darat al-Funun Project: an old house/complex converted into a nexus of art and culture accessible to all strata of society. Whether it is Hariri, Debbaneh or Audi in Lebanon; Shoman or Mango in Jordan; Toukan or Husseini in Palestine; or Ayidi, Jabri, or Azem in Syria, these heritage patrons are reclaiming their position in different places of the Levant through the appropriation of heritage and through an appeal to culture, art, and the intelligentsia.

During the Traveling Workshop, encounters with the public were diverse. At the very informal level, we met individuals on sites, like shop owners, citizens, clientele of coffee houses or hotels, other. At a more formal level, we had also the opportunity to engage in discussions with different types of publics and actors such as: NGOs & other social groups, representatives from historic neighborhoods, families and heritage patrons, experts and academics involved in heritage or in urban regeneration projects from Amman, Aqaba, Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli and Sidon to mention a few. These various encounters created some sort of a connected network of communications and contributed to an emergent social space of public contestation and critical debates on issues related to heritage and place, identity construction, globalization and socio-economic change re-

garding these sites. The Traveling Workshop develops a categorization and understanding of such emerging "public(s)" in the Levant that is intersecting, fragmentary, ephemeral, and/or disconnected. Yet, and in spite of the lack of tools for public contestation in the area, such publics have been very active, and somehow successful (in varying degrees) in debating issues related to the politics of heritage, development and place which have predominantly remained outside the realms of critical rationale debates and public contestation in the region that is overburdened with assumingly larger political questions. But, still, the various publics and social groups in the region are urged to become more well-informed, aware, and involved in order to be able to address and contest such issues.

Finally, this research project attempts to contribute to the critical debates on the issues mentioned above. The project becomes a connected network of communications with the various publics and actors; it aims to promote the emergence of a private sphere in the region of the Levant leading to the emergence of communication structures that facilitate the generation of a social space hosting critical public debate. Such communication structures, of which this research group is but one, might contribute and enrich an emerging public sphere within the region that is capable of forming a transformed and critical public opinion regarding issues of heritage definition, place development politics, and identity construction. The project aims to inaugurate an NGO: Forum of Critical Studies on Heritage and Place Politics in Contemporary Levant, such an NGO might be considered a positive step for generating such a social space that hosts critical debates.