

## Reflection on Masters Graduation Thesis 2023-24

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### The Impossible Revolution: Pursuing Liberation, Peace, and Spatial Equity in Syria

#### On the research methodology

##### - The methodological framework

The research employed a combination of methodologies. It utilised Peter Marcuse's Critical Urban Planning Theory, which outlines four stages for addressing issues: analysis, exposure, proposal, and politicisation. This theory guides the exploration of root causes, structural practices, concrete proposals, and necessary political actions. In conjunction with this framework, a timeline of Syria's conflict stages was employed, aiding in understanding pre-conflict conditions, during the conflict, status quo, the ongoing conflict, and the post-conflict recovery. The integration of these methodologies proved crucial, especially in leveraging spatial planning as a narrative tool. The research unfolded as a multidimensional story, serving various purposes from documentation to raising awareness, exposing injustices to provoking change, and advocating for a grassroots-led, just future.

This methodology can be applied to other contexts where spatial planning serves as a narrative tool.

##### - The theoretical approach

The research contributes to understanding and addressing the Syrian conflict's socio-economic, political, environmental, and spatial dimensions. It utilized a theoretical framework to explore key concepts such as authoritarianism, revolutions, and cities at war, shedding light on the conflict's complexities.

This research employed a nuanced approach, blending critical urban planning

with exploratory methods, to investigate spatial planning during conflict, with a focus on Syria. It combined inductive and deductive research methodologies, drawing from on-the-ground observations in Syria, to explore geopolitical shifts, demographic changes, and the spatial planning strategies of the authoritarian regime. However, given my personal experience and deep involvement in the context, there was a natural inclination towards employing the inductive methodology. This involved observing phenomena that unfolded across the conflict's timeframes, identifying recurring patterns, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and ultimately connecting these findings to broader urban theories. Incorporating this approach into many aspects of the research enabled a deeper understanding and a more hands-on approach to the problems at hand. This is particularly valuable when investigating conflict contexts, as it fosters a more nuanced comprehension of the issues involved.

#### - **The analytical approach**

The analytical framework was employed to understand the multidimensional Syrian conflict. It combined conflict dimensions with associated timeframes to comprehend root causes and inform recovery plans. Dimensions included environmental, socioeconomic, and political aspects analyzed across pre-conflict, during the conflict, and status quo timelines. This approach has managed to counter the oversimplified Western perspectives, providing a holistic understanding of the conflict's complexities. Distinguishing between analysis dimensions was clearer during the pre-conflict timeframe than in the subsequent phases. However, during the other frames, particularly during the conflict and status quo, this differentiation posed challenges. Additionally, employing these three dimensions occasionally felt confining, narrowing the research's focus to specific aspects that may not have been equally discernible across all timeframes.

#### - **The methods**

The scarcity of spatial data in Syria due to the conflict presented a significant challenge for conducting this research. However, to address this issue, a

combination of methods was employed to alleviate the constraints posed by the scarcity of official information. This approach ensured a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex situation. However, despite my efforts to adhere to scientific standards, it's important to note that the data utilized in this research was primarily sourced from organizations operating in the human rights sector, documenting the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime. While the data is deemed reliable, it's crucial to acknowledge its inherent political stance, which may be perceived by some as biased.

Furthermore, the research has effectively transformed a perceived weakness into a strength. Due to security and safety concerns, conducting fieldwork in Syria was unfeasible, depriving me of the opportunity to observe grassroots movements firsthand. However, this limitation led to the development of an innovative method: analyzing the banners of protestors. This approach proved to be invaluable, offering unique insights that may not have been possible through traditional fieldwork methods.

#### - **The outcomes**

It's crucial to highlight that the research yields four key outcomes of equal importance. These include Figure 47, illustrating the unjust events culminating in the 2011 uprising; Figure 71, documenting spatial tyranny; Figure 91, presenting the narratives of change framework; and finally, Figure 94, showing the conciliation tool. Each of these outcomes contributes to the primary goal of this research: reclaiming the Syrian narrative and empowering Syrians to construct a just future on their own terms.

Numerous milestones occurred throughout the research, altering the trajectory of the analysis and outcomes. These pivotal moments were often preceded by thorough self-reflection, aimed at preventing the imposition of personal biases and viewpoints on the research.

The initial milestone marked a shift in my approach, as I aimed to unlearn conventional methods of intervention in spatial planning. This transition involved moving away from the typical top-down spatial strategies derived from

pre-defined post-conflict recovery frameworks, often rooted in Western studies and irrelevant to the local context. Instead, I embraced a community-led, bottom up approach that prioritized insurgent grassroots movements and challenged existing power structures.

The second milestone was my decision to refrain from imposing my vision of Syria's future during the post-conflict timeframe. Recognizing the potential for bias and reductionism, I opted instead to provide a tool for individuals to collectively shape the narrative of the future. This pivotal moment operationalized the role of the spatial planner as a mediator in conflict contexts, emphasizing the importance of empowering communities to construct their own narratives of a just future. Testing the tool was fulfilling and relieving. It was gratifying to witness its impact and raise awareness about the Syrian conflict. I learned the significant role of spatial planners in moderating and facilitating dialogue. In my future work, I will strive to find and implement creative ways to listen to and learn from people, fostering meaningful conversations and solutions.

#### - **The role of spatial planners**

The research challenged conventional spatial planning practices when employed in conflict contexts. In post-conflict Syria, the risk of renewed violence persists amidst deep ethnic, religious, and social divisions exacerbated by the prolonged conflict. Trauma lingers among the populace, fueling potential new unrest. Conventional design approaches often overlook socio-political complexities, emphasizing technical solutions that prove to be superficial when addressing complex contexts. To address these challenges, a reevaluation of design pedagogy was necessary, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives and alternative tools for reconciliation.

This critical examination extends to spatial planners, urging them to adopt more effective strategies beyond conventional norms. Spatial planners, in particular, are requested to break free from conventional norms and adopt

strategies that are more nuanced, adaptable, and responsive to the unique needs of conflict-affected communities. Such an approach is essential for fostering sustainable peace and development in fragile contexts.

The research aimed to demonstrate one approach to achieving this goal. However, there exist myriad possibilities for accomplishing it by embracing a more openminded stance towards diverse and innovative solutions tailored to the unique needs of the affected communities.

#### - **The Academic neutrality**

The concept of academic neutrality often implies an objective, unbiased stance in research endeavours. However, it's essential to recognise that true neutrality may be an unattainable ideal. As humans, we inherently possess biases shaped by our experiences, beliefs, and social contexts. In conflict contexts where fundamental human rights are at stake, maintaining strict neutrality may even be ethically questionable. Researchers cannot divorce themselves entirely from their political, social, and moral convictions, particularly when advocating for justice and human rights.

In conflict settings, neutrality may inadvertently perpetuate injustices by failing to confront systemic oppression or atrocities. Researchers who claim neutrality may inadvertently uphold the status quo or contribute to the marginalisation of vulnerable populations. Thus, in this research, taking a principled stance became not only justifiable but necessary for ethical research practice. By acknowledging my biases and political perspectives, I could strive for transparency and integrity in my work while actively advocating for the rights and well-being of affected communities.

#### - **The Focus:**

The Syrian conflict witnessed atrocities committed by multiple actors, including the Syrian regime, opposition fighters, and ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). While the focus of this research is on the actions of the authoritarian regime, it's acknowledged that other groups were also involved in perpetrating

unspeakable acts of violence.

Furthermore, while this research primarily documents the authoritarian practices of the Syrian regime in the capital, Damascus, and As-Sweida city, it's crucial to recognize that atrocities occurred throughout Syria. However, due to limitations, it was impossible to comprehensively document all these actions within the scope of this study.

- **The relation between the research's topic and the Planning Complex Cities topic:**

The focus on disparities, conflicts arising from the distribution of spatial resources, and the examination of institutional causes and drivers of spatial inequities aligns with the core principles of this research. The project delves into the complexities of spatial planning practices in conflict contexts, which requires analyzing and understanding the interplay between spatial and institutional factors. This project aimed to address the manifestations of inequity in conflict zones, which is deeply interlinked with the theme of the studio. Furthermore, exploring the role of institutions, whether formal or informal, in causing patterns of injustice is also a shared value.

The research contributed to the broader theme of the graduation studio by exploring how recommended institutional changes might contribute to more sustainable spatial outcomes and thus improve spatial justice in contexts of conflict.

Moreover, the project is also aligned with the Department of Urbanism's mission to enhance knowledge of adapting the built environment to societal and environmental changes. This connection lies in the shared emphasis on sustainable urban development values.

- **The relevance of the research in the larger social, professional and scientific framework**

The thesis contributed to the research gap in spatializing authoritarianism, especially regarding the Syrian conflict. It managed to build upon the previous studies on the causes of the conflict and suggest pathways for enhancing spatial

justice dimensions in post-conflict landscapes, which can lead to national reconciliation in Syria. By doing so, it contributed to the increasingly growing literature that focuses on the weaponization of the built environment and the destruction of cities. Finally, the project acts as an advocacy effort to raise awareness about the conflict from a Syrian point of view. This helped to reclaim the stolen Syrian narrative.

- **Closing Remarks:**

This 10-month journey has been profoundly transformative for me. When I initially pitched my project in September, it evoked a flood of emotions, and I found myself overwhelmed with doubt about my ability to conduct the research. As a displaced person directly affected by the conflict, the topic was deeply triggering, especially considering that atrocities are still being committed and justice remains elusive.

However, over the course of this journey, I found a sense of healing. Through the process of research and analysis, I was able to channel my anger into productive avenues, expressing it through maps, texts, and diagrams. Moreover, this experience allowed me to transition my activism in the Syrian revolution into a more structured form of academic activism, which felt empowering and fulfilling.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to my mentors, Caroline Newton and Jonathan Subendran. Their support and open-mindedness were essential to the success of this research. Thank you for believing in me and giving me the freedom to explore this complex topic.