

Syria

The war is still raging, but the race to rebuild Aleppo has already begun

Architects, town planners and engineers plan reconstruction of Syrian city's historic centre, in effort to avoid postwar 'Dubaification'



Kate Connolly and Werner Bloch in Berlin



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▲ The ruins of Umayyad mosque, Aleppo. All photographs from Aleppo: Ein Krieg zerstört Weltkulturerbe Geschichte (Aleppo: A War Destroys a World Cultural Heritage Site), by Mamoun Fansa.

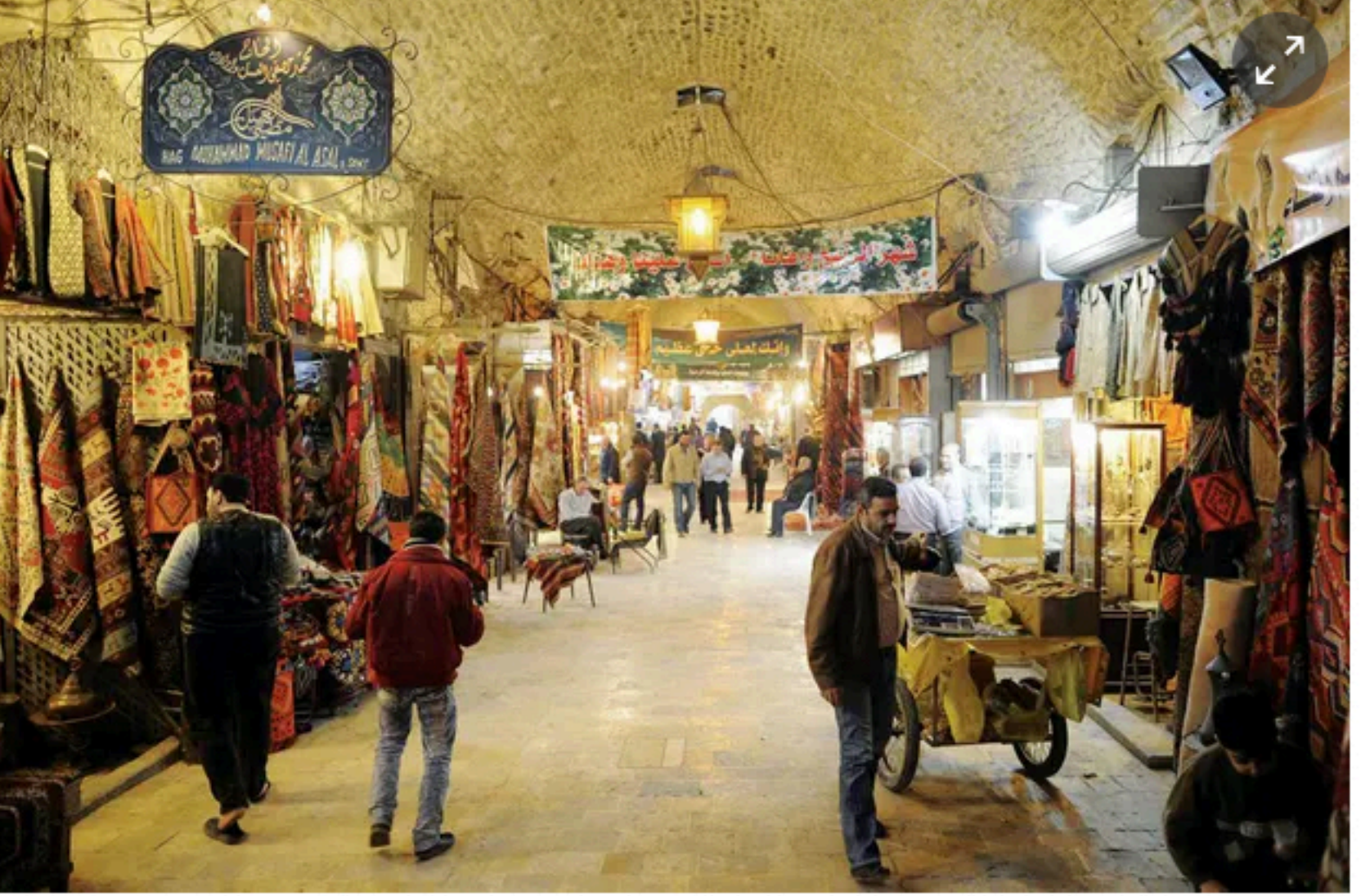
Mamoun Fansa sits at the desk of his Berlin flat, scanning maps of his native Aleppo, summoning up whatever slender threads of optimism he can.

The fighting may still be raging, the city half destroyed, but Fansa has his eye on the future, as he attempts to organise a postwar plan for the reconstruction of its devastated centre, home to many of the country's most cherished historic sites.

"Some may call me naive," he says, "but to do nothing would be utterly cynical. To sit on my hands while war is raging there is not an option."

He lists the extent of the destruction that has befallen one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities since the battle for Aleppo began: at least 24,000 people have died and half its 2.5 million inhabitants have been forced to flee. Barrel bombs, rockets and mortars along with conventional munition have destroyed 80% of the buildings, and of the old city's 100 mosques, a quarter lie in ruins while the rest are badly damaged.

More than half of the listed buildings in the old city - including many souks, its famous citadel, the minaret of the 11th-century Umayyad mosque, along with bath houses, schools, hospitals and entire residential districts - have been reduced to rubble.



▲ Sarab Street souk before the conflict ... Photograph: Mamoun Fansa



▲ ... and after shelling. Photograph: Mamoun Fansa



Fansa, who moved to Germany in 1967 as a conscientious objector and was then unable to return home to Syria for the next two decades, has assembled a team of architects, town planners, engineers and fellow archaeologists, who together have formed the initiative Strategies for the Reconstruction of Aleppo. In what some have termed a foolhardy plan, others highly idealistic, the movement plans to reconstruct the city regardless of who wins the war.

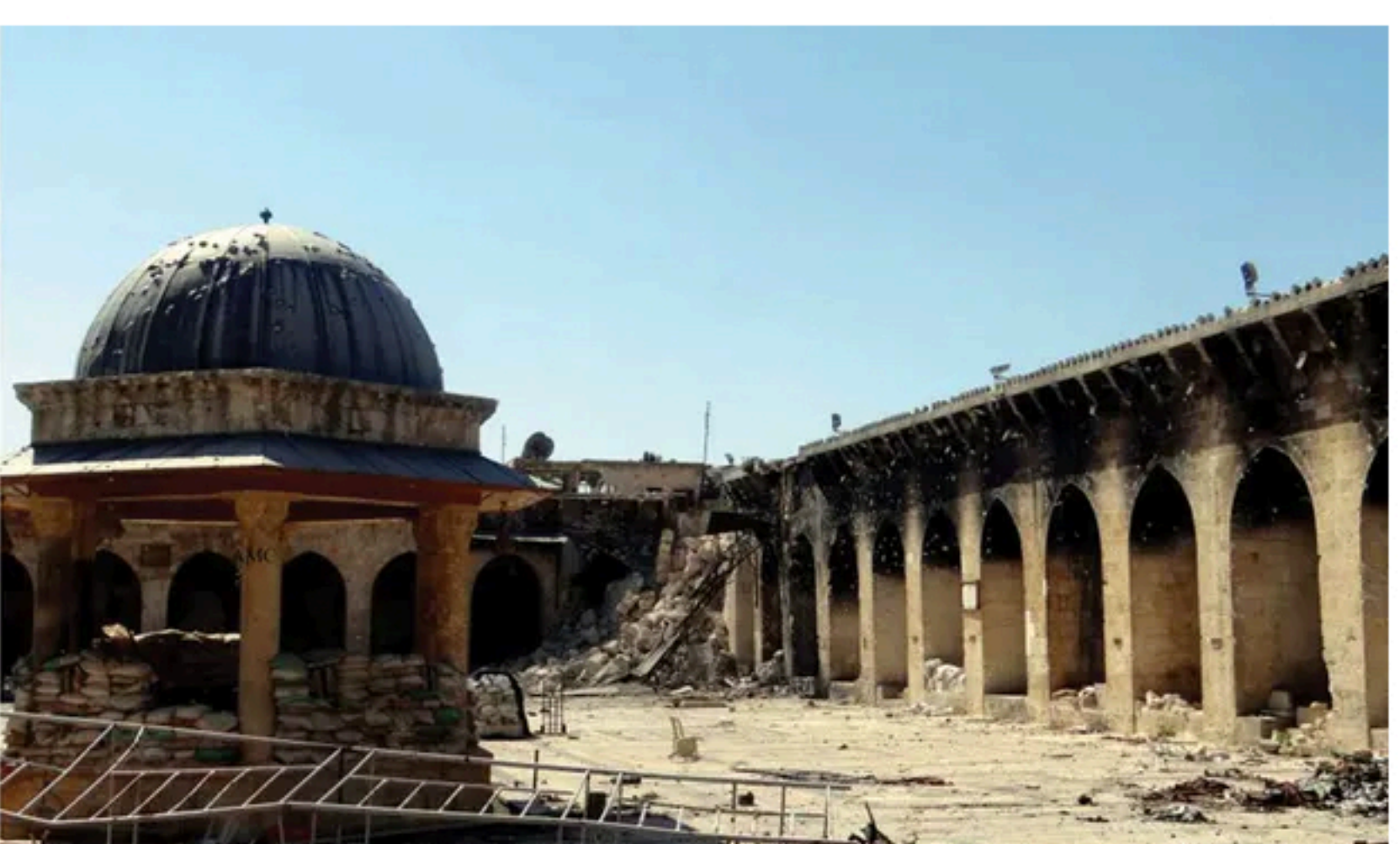
Later this month it will deliver a memorandum to Unesco, the UN cultural heritage organisation, setting out a concrete proposal.

Their many detractors say their plans amount to hardly more than tinkering with computerised models while the war is still raging. But Hilmar von Lojewski, an urban planner who spent years working in the local administration in Aleppo, believes the time is ripe.

"We cannot stand by until the last embers of the war have died down," he says. "If we don't start with a reconstruction plan now, we'll pay for it for the rest of our lives, because the moment there's a peace agreement, international investors, especially from Saudi Arabia and Lebanon along with corrupt officials from the Syrian government, will pounce on the city and guarantee that Aleppo loses its historical face once and for all."



▲ Umayyad mosque in Aleppo, which dates back to the 11th century. Photograph: Mamoun Fansa



▲ The remains of Umayyad mosque. Photograph: Mamoun Fansa



The experts say that the 5,000-year-old city, whose cultural riches have much to do with its erstwhile key position on the main caravan route across Syria to Baghdad, is threatened by what they term a "Dubaification", which could swiftly mean the end of its cultural and social heritage.

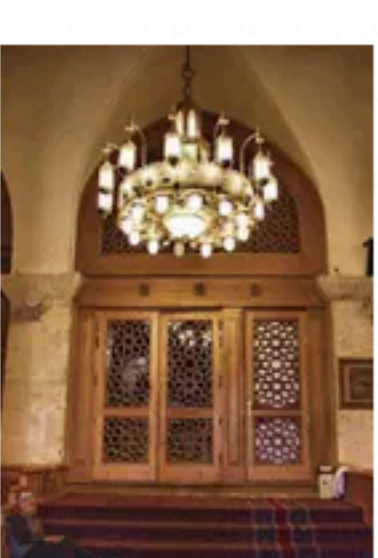
They argue that those most likely to take over power in Syria are those least likely to want to preserve its cultural legacy. It has happened often enough with other war-torn historic cities, notably Beirut, which is, somewhat ironically, the city where the experts are due to meet in early summer to formalise their plan.

"The fact is a people without culture is easier to govern," says Fansa, pointing to the recent efforts of Islamic State to destroy cultural sites in northern Iraq.

What makes the movement's goals especially poignant is that all of its members spent years working on the multimillion dollar renovation of Aleppo, sponsored by the German government to the tune of an estimated €40m (as well as writing off a huge, East German-era debt, on condition reconstruction was carried out as specified). The project was more or less complete - down to ornamental drainpipes and wooden-latticed balconies - when war broke out.

"As it turns out it was all for nothing," says Fansa, who in 2013 wrote a book on Aleppo that contains page after page of heartbreaking "before and after" photographs.

Anette Gangler from the University of Stuttgart, who spent years compiling the Aleppo city archives, says she was touched by the new consciousness the reconstruction project had awoken in the Aleppines, who had learned to take pride in their city again.



▲ Umayyad mosque. Photograph: Mamoun Fansa



▲ Umayyad mosque destroyed. Photograph: Mamoun Fansa



"We were on the way to really invigorating the old city with new vitality," she says. Then came the war. Even the land registry records were destroyed - deliberately say some, in an effort by the Assad regime and its supporters to enable them to claim everything for themselves once the war is over. Already much of the land is said to have been sold. Hopes lie in the digitalised copies of the records, which are in storage in Cottbus, Germany, which can prove who the real owners are.

The experts say there are plenty of lessons to be learned from Germany itself, where postwar reconstruction happened in such a rapid and uncoordinated fashion that many town planners argue, not uncontroversially, that more damage was done to German cities after 1945 than by the war itself. In terms of the scale of destruction, Syria is said to be in an even worse state.

Fansa receives on-the-ground reports from his native city in erratic emails from an old friend, a construction engineer who is determined to stay in Aleppo regardless of the dangers. Fansa takes heart from his friend's attempts to document the damage and pass the information to him in Berlin, as he risks his life to save everything from ornamented stones from the minaret to relics from important graves that have been plundered.

"In a recent cloak-and-dagger operation together with some like-minded Aleppines he managed to brick up its 14th-century sundial for safe-keeping," he says.

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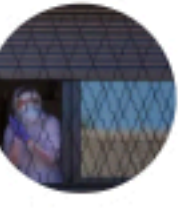
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