

REBUILDING IDENTITY AND RESILIENCE: PARTICIPATORY URBAN DESIGN IN ALEPPO'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

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Image Source: Author

1. PROBLEM DEFINITION

The Syrian civil war devastated Aleppo's eastern suburbs, which are primarily composed of informal settlements. While often labeled "unplanned," these neighbourhoods follow a distinct urban logic shaped by vernacular traditions, cultural practices, and extended family networks (Turner, 1976). Prior to the conflict, official planning relied on top-down redevelopment schemes aimed at replacing these neighbourhoods with standardized housing. Such policies frequently involved forced evictions and inequitable land redistribution, disrupting long-standing social networks and producing socially and structurally unsustainable outcomes (Porter, 2010).

This situation reflects a broader global challenge: conventional planning often overlooks the complexities of informal settlements, particularly in post-conflict contexts constrained by limited finances, weak governance,

and political instability (UN-Habitat, 2017; Al-Harithy, 2021). International experience shows that participatory, context-sensitive strategies can foster resilience and continuity (Alberti et al., 2019). The New Urban Agenda (Habitat III, Quito, 2016) further emphasizes inclusive, multilateral planning that moves beyond narrow technocratic models (Agha & al-Rish, 2022). This study argues that informality frequently underestimated in planning discourse can serve as a foundation for reconstruction that is culturally grounded and socially resilient. Yet this potential is undermined by persistent tabula rasa paradigms privileging uniform, imposed designs over the nuanced spatial and cultural logics embedded in existing settlements. Such approaches risk further marginalizing local knowledge, fragmenting social networks, and perpetuating displacement (Porter, 2010; Shahin & Al-Asali, 2023).

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can the reconstruction of Aleppo's informal settlements preserve social cohesion and cultural identity while meeting urgent housing and infrastructure needs?
- How can local traditions of spatial organization be integrated with global planning strategies to overcome structural barriers—such as financing, governance, and political will—and support context-sensitive reconstruction?

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The reconstruction of Aleppo's informal settlements requires a conceptual foundation that bridges theories of incrementalism, participatory design, vernacular resilience, and global precedents. Informality is reframed by these perspectives, and seen not as a deficit, but as a resource for post-conflict recovery.

1.3 INCREMENTALISM AND SELF-BUILD

Turner (1976) argued that housing should be understood as a process rather than a product, with residents actively shaping their environments. Hamdi (2004) highlighted the effectiveness of small-scale, community based interventions in fragile contexts, while Habraken (1972) proposed structural "supports" that allow residents to adapt housing over time. These principles resonate strongly with Aleppo's informal settlements, where families expanded homes incrementally, adapted courtyards for climate control, and relied on collective construction practices.

1.4 PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND AGENCY

Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of participation" emphasizes the importance of genuine power-sharing in planning processes. The Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi (Hasan, 2010) demonstrates how collective agency can deliver low-cost, sustainable infrastructure, while the New Urban Agenda (UN-Habitat, 2017) advocates inclusive, multilateral planning. These examples

underline the necessity for Aleppo's reconstruction to move beyond token consultation toward true community partnership.

1.5 VERNACULAR AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE

Vernacular architecture embodies adaptive strategies that respond to climate, culture, and social norms. Rapoport (1969) showed how climate and culture influence dwelling forms, while AlSayyad (2006) emphasized the continuity of traditions in modern urbanism. Gehl (2010) argued that urban recovery must restore everyday rhythms of life, not only physical structures. Aleppo's inward-facing courtyards, extended family housing, and incremental densification exemplify these principles, demonstrating how vernacular logics can inform resilient reconstruction.

1.6 GLOBAL PRECEDENTS

Comparative case studies illustrate the feasibility of participatory and incremental approaches. The rebuilding of Nahr al-Bared camp in Lebanon (UNRWA, 2010), the "Half a House" project in Chile (O'Brien et al., 2020), Belapur incremental housing in India (Steinø et al., 2020), and the Orangi Pilot Project in Pakistan all show that community-led processes can produce more sustainable, culturally responsive outcomes than top-down redevelopment. These examples provide adaptable lessons for Aleppo, where reconstruction must balance urgency with long-term resilience.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, design-led methodology that integrates spatial analysis, comparative precedent review, and participatory perspectives. The aim is to examine the cultural, social, and spatial logics of Aleppo's informal settlements and to test reconstruction strategies that build on these foundations. The research draws on historical maps, aerial imagery, UNOSAT satellite damage assessments, and published documentation. These are complemented by personal knowledge and community narratives based on lived experience in Aleppo. As a native of the city with architectural training, I bring an insider perspective while compensating for restricted fieldwork access through remote tools and secondary sources. The analysis involved mapping and typological study of Haidariyye's urban fabric, with particular attention to incremental construction, density patterns, and community-driven infrastructure. Theories of participatory urbanism were applied to frame spatial analysis, evaluate collective infrastructure practices, and interpret patterns of adaptability and cultural determinants in dwelling organization. Design proposals were developed as methodological devices to test reconstruction scenarios. These scenarios synthesize site-specific analysis with lessons from international precedents, allowing the exploration of participatory strategies capable of addressing governance and financing constraints while preserving cultural identity.

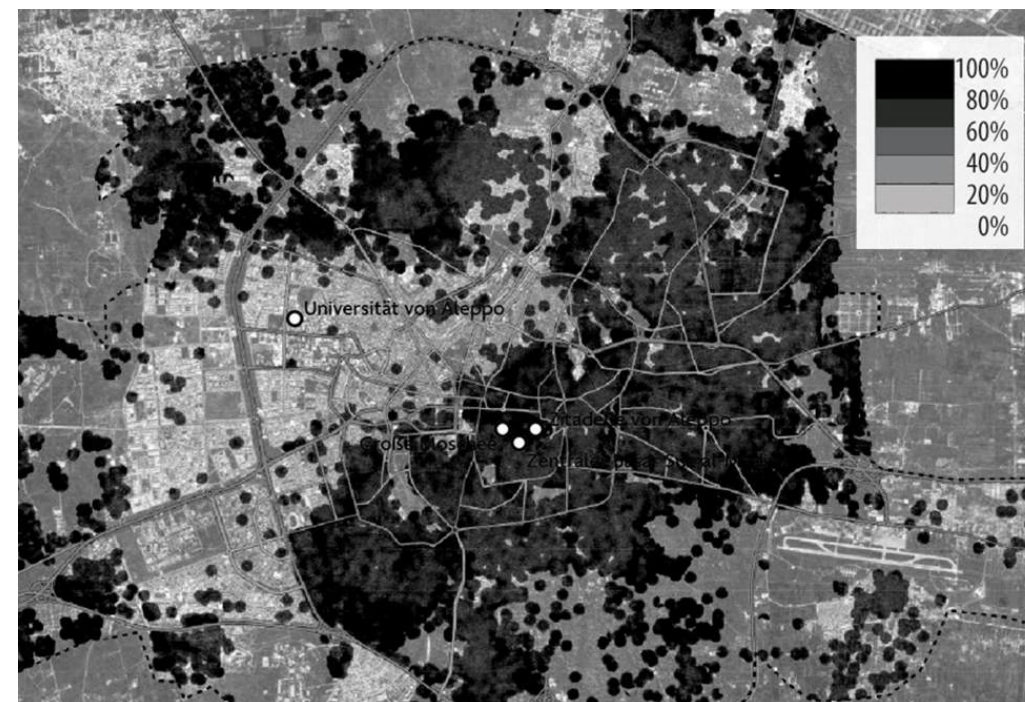


Figure 01 Extent of Destruction, September 2022 © F.A.Z./UNITAR/UNOSAT

3. ALEPPO'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: A CRITICAL LOOK AT URBAN FORM, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND TOP-DOWN PLANNING

Reconstruction strategies for Aleppo's informal settlements must address not only spatial and functional concerns but also the social and cultural systems embedded within them. Despite variations in density, these neighbourhoods share structural similarities that make adaptive solutions transferable across contexts. Their emergence reflects both the state's failure to provide sufficient housing and the limited financial capacity of residents to access formal districts. Informal settlements now cover roughly one-third of Aleppo's urban area, spanning twenty-two districts (Wakely et al., 2009). They can be broadly categorized into two types: those developed on privately owned agricultural land, such as Sheikh Fares, Jabal Badro, and Haidariyye; and those established on unused public land, such as Nayrab Camp, which primarily housed Palestinian refugees (Al Hamoud, 2022). The war severely damaged these neighbourhoods, with UNOSAT data showing disproportionately high levels of destruction in informal areas. The darker the colors on the satellite images, the greater the degree of destruction.

4. CASE STUDY OF HAIDAREIYEH

Haidareiyeh was selected for detailed analysis because, prior to the war, it had been targeted for one of Aleppo's largest real estate development

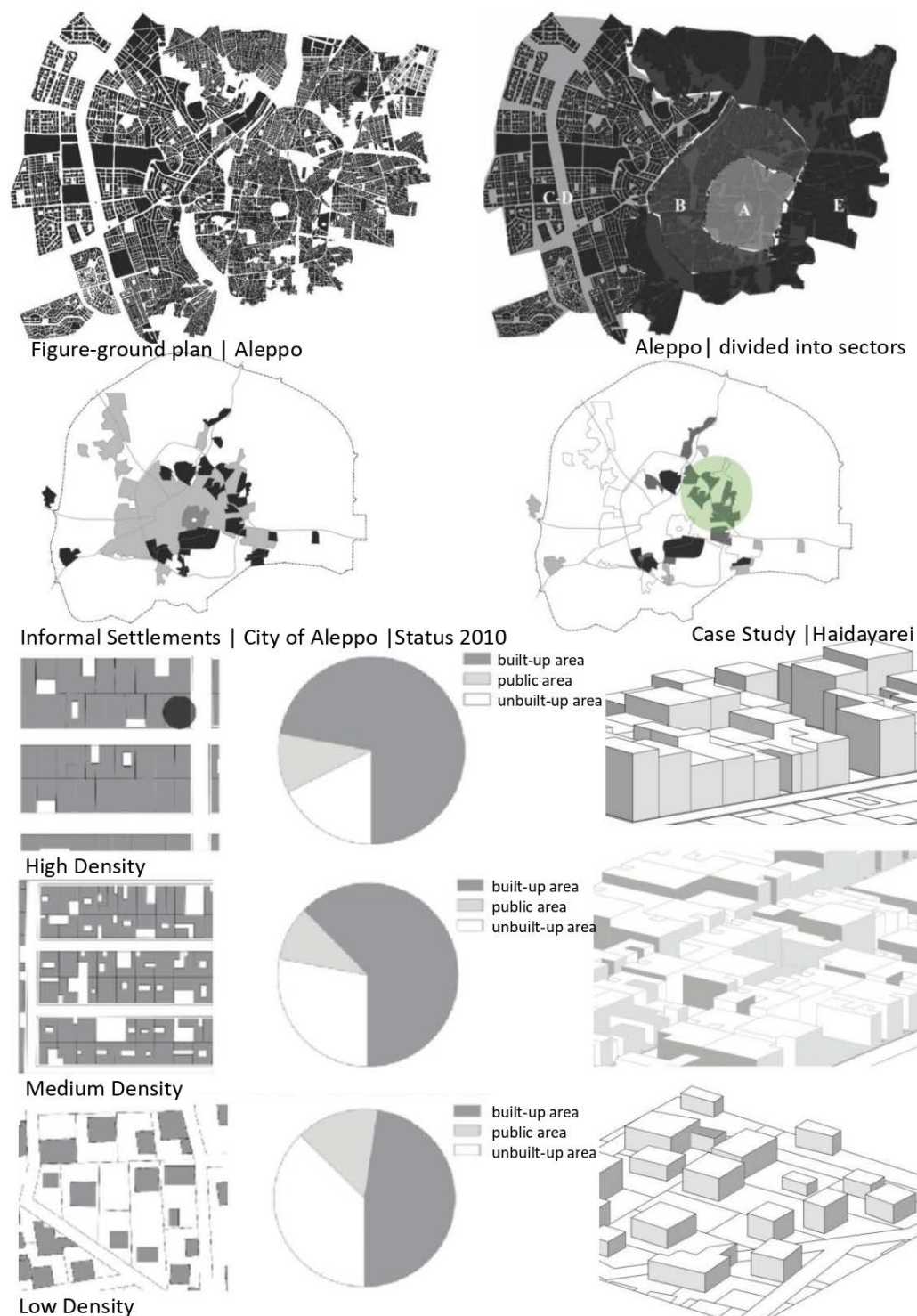


Figure 02 Informal Settlement in Aleppo | Analysis – © Author (Asser Al Hamoud, 2025)

projects: a tabula rasa plan that disregarded the existing community fabric. Established in the 1970s on subdivided agricultural land informally sold to low-income families, Haidariyye lacked municipal registration, leaving tenure insecure. Nevertheless, residents cultivated strong traditions of collective action and self-help. By 2011, the settlement housed approximately 35,000 people (although this number has since been significantly reduced) living mostly in two-story homes along narrow but functional streets. The neighbourhood also included two primary schools, one of which was temporary and overcrowded (Wakely et al., 2009).

Haidareiyeh was socially cohesive despite its internal diversity. Migrants from northern and eastern Syria (including Kurdish and other minority groups) settled in clusters according to their origins but coexisted peacefully. Communal solidarity underpinned initiatives such as sewer construction, street maintenance, and collective lobbying of authorities. Women played a crucial role in household economies through embroidery, shoemaking, seasonal labor, and other home-based work. Nonetheless, poverty and illiteracy, particularly among women, remained persistent challenges (Wakely et al., 2009).

Housing was organized in inward-oriented blocks with courtyard houses ranging from 65 to 200 m². These courtyards facilitated privacy, climate control, and extended family living. Construction followed an incremental logic: families typically began with a multifunctional room and expanded over time. Roof terraces were used for laundry or summer sleeping, while vertical expansion accommodated both family growth and rental demand. This morphology embodied local knowledge, the principles of neighborly conduct in Islamic tradition, and functional flexibility, while also enabling social practices such as family gatherings and collective events. The majority of the streets were narrow, meandering lanes. While unsuitable for heavy traffic, they were well adapted for pedestrians and animals, offering shade and protection from direct sunlight due to the close proximity of adjoining buildings. These streets also functioned as social spaces: serving as playgrounds for children and as venues for community events such as weddings (Al Hamoud, 2025).

Infrastructure, however, was fragile and largely resident-built. Water was partly supplied through public networks but often supplemented by wells and private tankers. Sewerage systems were informally constructed, electricity combined limited state supply with unsafe private connections, and waste collection was restricted to main streets. Despite these deficiencies, residents' capacity to organize and maintain services illustrates a form of participatory urbanism, where shared responsibility compensated for weak State presence (Al Hamoud, 2022).

Haidareiyeh epitomizes the contradictions of Aleppo's informal settlements: created out of housing scarcity and state neglect, yet sustained through solidarity, incremental development, and cultural resilience. Its vulnerabilities (insecure tenure, fragile infrastructure, poverty, and overcrowding) underscore the structural barriers to reconstruction. At

the same time, its community-driven practices align with contemporary principles of participatory planning and incrementalism, providing a grounded foundation for developing context-sensitive reconstruction strategies.

5. SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO THE RECONSTRUCTION OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Despite the resilience and community agency demonstrated in Haidariyye, the reconstruction of Aleppo's informal settlements faces significant obstacles that operate across local, institutional, and structural levels.

5.1 LOCAL OBSTACLES

At the local level, residents face insecure tenure, poverty, overcrowding, and fragile infrastructure. Many lack formal property rights, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion from official reconstruction programs. Limited financial resources constrain their ability to rebuild, while overcrowding and deteriorated infrastructure complicate the provision of adequate housing and services (Al Hamoud, 2022). Comparable challenges were addressed in the Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, where residents collectively financed and built sewer systems. This example demonstrates how community-driven initiatives can overcome infrastructural deficits, suggesting that similar strategies could be adapted to Aleppo's context.

5.2 INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES

Institutional barriers stem from weak governance, corruption, and the absence of participatory planning frameworks. Municipal authorities often lack the capacity or political will to engage communities meaningfully, while bureaucratic lack of transparency undermines trust between residents and state institutions. A relevant precedent can be found in the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared camp in Lebanon (UNRWA, 2010), where international agencies collaborated with local committees to mediate between state institutions and residents. This hybrid governance model illustrates how participatory mechanisms can mitigate weak state capacity and foster more inclusive reconstruction processes.

5.3 STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES

Structural barriers are shaped by broader political and economic conditions. International sanctions, restricted access to financing, and ongoing political instability severely limit the resources available for reconstruction. At the same time, the regime's prioritization of political control over social recovery limits the possibility of inclusive, community-driven approaches. In other contexts, such as Chile's "Half a House" project, financial constraints were addressed through incremental housing

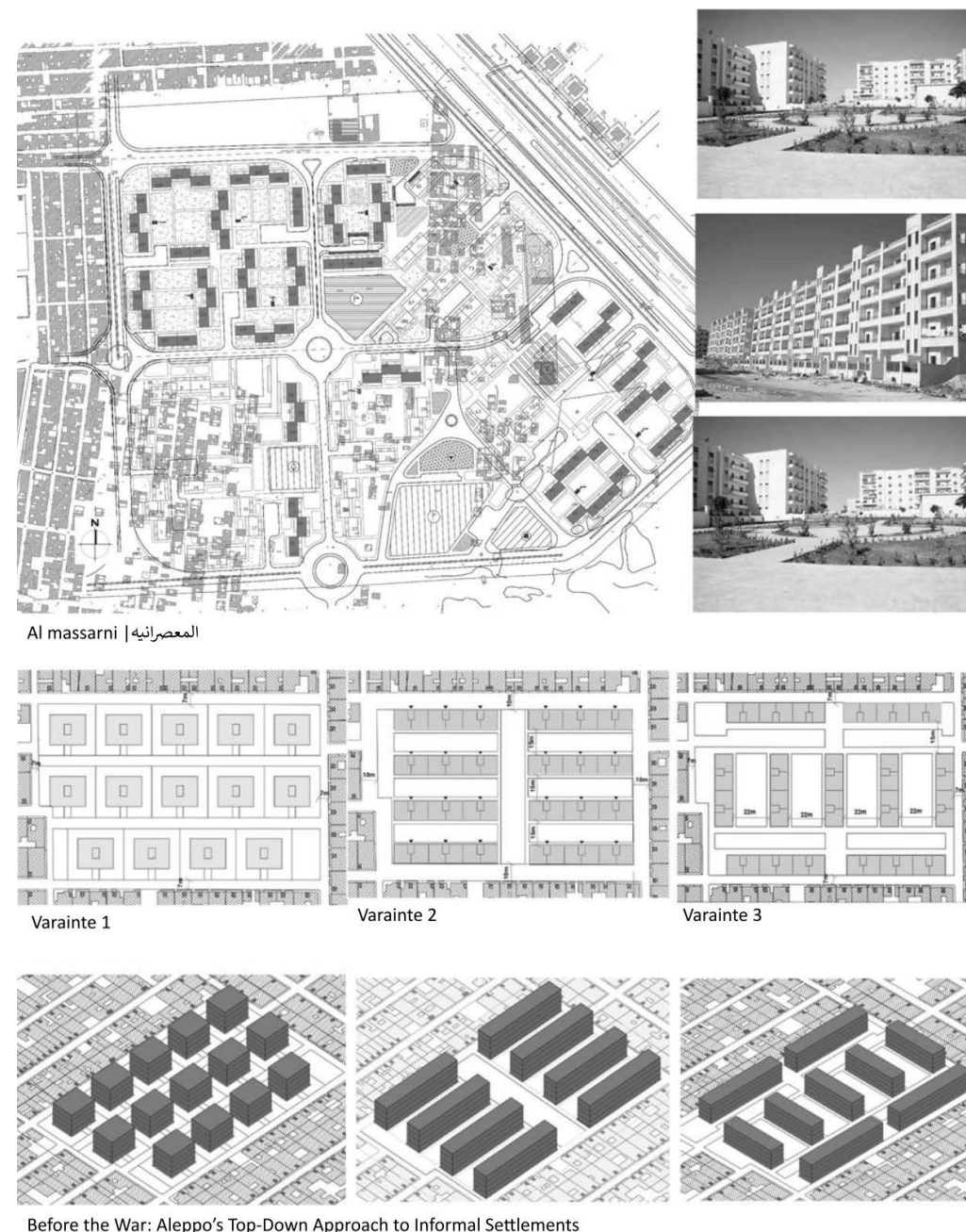


Figure 03 How the city of Aleppo might address the problems of informal settlements | Top-Down Reconstruction © Author (Asser Al Hamoud, 2025)

strategies that reduced upfront costs while allowing families to expand over time (O'Brien et al., 2020). These approaches suggest that even under severe resource limitations, reconstruction can proceed if designed to leverage community agency and incremental growth. Taken together, these obstacles highlight the multi-scalar challenges of reconstruction in informal settlements. Local vulnerabilities, institutional weaknesses, and structural constraints intersect to create a highly restrictive environment. Yet international precedents demonstrate that these barriers are not insurmountable. By adapting lessons from participatory and incremental approaches elsewhere, Aleppo's reconstruction can move toward strategies that integrate local knowledge, institutional reforms, and international support, ensuring outcomes that are both socially just and context-sensitive. In Aleppo, especially in informal settlements such as Haidariyye, if reconstruction were to begin, two main options would emerge.

6. TOP-DOWN RECONSTRUCTION: THE CENTRALIZED MODEL OF RECONSTRUCTION IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Historically, the Syrian state has approached informal settlements through a centralized, top-down model that excludes meaningful community participation. This strategy remains at the lowest, non-participatory levels of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, where decision-making power is monopolized by state institutions.

The Al-Haidariya housing complex exemplifies this approach. Launched as a flagship reconstruction initiative, the project was designed to cover 82 hectares and deliver approximately 7,700 residential units at an estimated cost of 2.1 billion Syrian pounds (Syrian News Channel, 2020). However, the project largely remained on paper and faced multiple obstacles, including financial shortages, political instability, ownership disputes, and weak governance capacity. Its conception was primarily quantitative, focusing on the number of units rather than qualitative dimensions such as cultural alignment spatial identity, or residents' quality of life (Sukkar et al., 2021).

A central issue was the treatment of property rights. Residents were officially categorized as "encroachers," reinforcing the municipality's legal authority over the land. While 1,100 families registered with the municipality were promised priority in housing allocation, only those able to prove prior residence were considered for new apartments (Sukkar et al., 2021). This exclusionary framing reflects the broader logic of the regime's reconstruction strategy, where legal and bureaucratic mechanisms are used to marginalize existing communities.

The symbolic-share system, employed by Aleppo municipality before the war, further illustrates the inequities of this model. Housing units in informal settlements were converted into symbolic shares (for example, 10 square meters equaled one share) and new apartments were distributed accordingly. In practice, this system produced unequal outcomes:

residents with large plots often received only one apartment, regardless of the actual value of their property (Al Hamoud, 2022).

Beyond ownership, the urban design of such projects reflects the rigidity of the state-led model. Standardized reconstruction plans impose uniform building heights, plot ratios, and land uses, producing generic environments disconnected from local history and social context. Even when master plans designate public spaces, their designs are often generic and fail to reflect the lived realities of residents.

In addition to these social and spatial shortcomings, the centralized model is also impractical for the reconstruction of informal settlements. Large-scale housing complexes demand extensive financial resources, long implementation periods, and strong institutional capacity: conditions rarely available in post war contexts. As a result, they are ill-suited to address the urgent housing needs of displaced populations or to support rapid urban recovery.

By prioritizing regulatory efficiency and symbolic ownership schemes over the complexities of tenure and community organization, the Assad regime perpetuates bureaucratic non transparency, erodes public trust, and exacerbates social fragmentation. While centralized models may accelerate regulatory implementation and provide the regime with greater political control, they ultimately fail to create inclusive, resilient communities. Their dependence on significant time, resources, and financing makes them unsuitable for the reconstruction of informal settlements, where urgent, flexible, and community-driven solutions are required.

7. BOTTOM-UP RECONSTRUCTION: A HUMAN-CENTREED APPROACH TO INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Building on the theoretical foundations and global precedents outlined above, this section proposes a phased, bottom-up model for the reconstruction of informal settlements, using Haidariyye as a case study. Unlike conventional top-down strategies, which often reproduce the very barriers they aim to resolve, this model explicitly addresses the structural obstacles that undermine recovery. Each phase is defined by the specific challenge it addresses, the shortcomings of previous approaches, and the participatory solutions proposed to address these limitations.

7.1 PHASE ONE: SECURING LEGAL OWNERSHIP

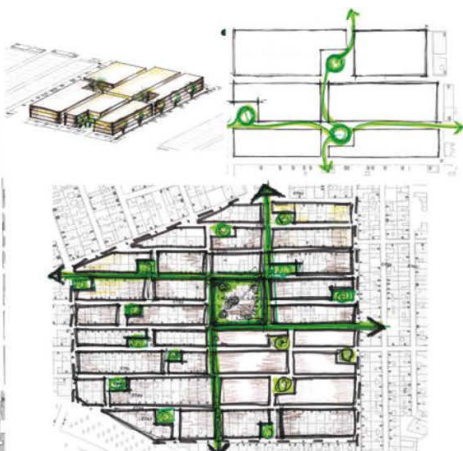
The first step in any sustainable reconstruction process is the establishment of secure tenure. Clear ownership of property is essential for regulating construction, safeguarding residents' rights, and fostering confidence in housing and infrastructure investment.

Guidelines for proving ownership must be flexible and inclusive. Accepted

Phases of Incremental Reconstruction



Case Study: A Section of Informal Settlement in Eastern Aleppo



Developing Urban Concept Through Incremental Approach



Phases One and Two: Securing Legal Ownership and Neighborhood Planning & Design



Phases Three and Four: Envisioning Housing Densification, Urban Integration, and Inclusion — A Planner's Imagination

forms of documentation may include identification papers, property deeds, court orders, building permits, lease agreements, or cooperative housing documents. In the absence of formal documents, ownership can be verified through testimonies from at least two recognized community leaders. Historical maps should also be employed to reconstruct the pre-war layout of property boundaries.

The number of post-war housing units should match the pre-war level by preserving existing road patterns and legally subdividing land plots. While adjustments to street layouts may be necessary, they must be accompanied by documentation and legal regularization (ICRC, 1949). Lot depth and street width should also be preserved. With citizen involvement and proper mapping, land can be efficiently redivided and property rights restored.

Where the introduction of public spaces reduces the total number of available housing units, displaced residents must be compensated with substitute housing in the same urban area. One of the key advantages of this approach is its reliance on pre-conflict architectural patterns and functional land divisions, as opposed to the imposition of standardized, top-down models.

This participatory approach avoids displacement, builds trust, and lays the legal foundation for community led reconstruction. Engaging people at the local level accelerates the process and enhances its legitimacy.

7.2 PHASE TWO: NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING AND DESIGN

Once ownership has been regularized, the political and institutional will to commence urban planning is strengthened. At this stage, urban form (plots, streets, squares, and public spaces) must be shaped by established ownership patterns, while infrastructure networks such as water, electricity, sanitation, and transportation are integrated into the broader plan.

Well-defined block spaces should be restored to original inhabitants, who can now build in accordance with urban planning regulations. This marks a transition from informality to structured, state-supported development in partnership with residents.

Reconfiguring land plots and filling vacant areas enables the introduction of high-quality green and public spaces. These not only enhance the city aesthetically but also reduce excessive building density, improve ventilation, and promote social diversity. Importantly, public spaces must be safeguarded from conversion into parking or other non-social uses: a recurring challenge in other international contexts, such as Chile. Instead, they should function as communal meeting grounds, playgrounds, and parks, fostering social cohesion and rebuilding trust in the aftermath of conflict.

Figure 04 Second Approach – Bottom-Up Reconstruction © Author (Asser Al Hamoud, 2025)

Unlike the rest of Aleppo, where streets are often designed primarily for car traffic, the proposed model prioritizes pedestrians. The aim is to create a walkable, human-scaled environment that reflects pre-war patterns of neighbourhood life. Parking can remain on-street, as it was before the war, avoiding the need for costly underground garages.

Community participation is central to the success of this phase. Mechanisms for inclusive engagement include:

- Workshops with women, youth and children to articulate local visions and needs (Arnstein, 1969).
- Prototyping small-scale interventions, such as mini-parks constructed from recycled materials (Lydon et al., 2012).
- Collective construction activities, including painting, planting, and carpentry undertaken by residents.
- Sustainable management structures, such as local committees responsible for maintaining and programming public spaces (UN-Habitat, 2015).

7.3 PHASE THREE: HOUSING CONSTRUCTION AND DENSIFICATION

After the removal of rubble, the planning of streets and properties, and the provision of infrastructure by government authorities, the role of residents begins in earnest. Once technical infrastructure is in place, residents can begin housing construction independently or with state support, within a regulatory framework that ensures both quality and safety.

Low-cost building techniques, access to microcredit, and technical services provided by the state or civil society organizations can serve as critical support mechanisms (Davis, 2006). Given the resource constraints of post-war contexts, municipalities and local builders should play a central role by offering logistical expertise and assistance.

Prior to construction or expansion, residents must sign agreements with Aleppo Municipality to comply with density and height requirements. This prevents land speculation and supports equitable urban growth. Such agreements, complemented by guidance from municipal experts or small construction firms experienced in informal settlements, help residents choose appropriate materials and manage costs effectively.

This model not only accelerates housing delivery but also strengthens residents' sense of ownership and identification with their living environment. However, there are risks; particularly the possibility that residents may extend homes without adhering to safety standards. To mitigate this, flexibility should be balanced with oversight, allowing a degree of "design chaos" while still safeguarding essential safety requirements.

7.4 PHASE FOUR: URBAN INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

The final phase centres on integrating reconstructed neighbourhoods into the broader urban fabric. This involves upgrading essential services, constructing public facilities such as schools and health centres, and fostering both social and economic linkages to the wider city.

An adaptable, phased approach allows the model to be applied in different areas as needed. The more inclusive and participatory the process, the greater the likelihood of achieving outcomes that are resilient, equitable, and sustainable.

The proposed model can also reduce financial burdens, accelerate the reconstruction process, and deliver clear, tangible results.

8. CONCLUSION

This research highlights the critical tension between standardized, top-down reconstruction models and the lived realities of Aleppo's informal neighbourhoods. Far from being chaotic or disordered, these self-built environments demonstrate complex spatial logics, cultural adaptability, and collective resilience. Their destruction demands not a tabula rasa approach, but a reconstruction process rooted in recognition, participation, and continuity (Pendlebury, 2013).

Drawing on global precedents, vernacular traditions, and participatory design theory, this study outlines a framework for incremental rebuilding that positions the community not only as beneficiaries but as co-authors of their urban future. From securing tenure to designing inclusive public spaces, every phase underscores the value of local knowledge and co-governance. The proposed model can also reduce financial burdens, accelerate the reconstruction process, and deliver clear, tangible results.

Investing in this bottom-up, human-centred approach is not only socially just but also practical. Unlike centralized mega-projects that demand massive resources and often remain unrealized, incremental and participatory reconstruction is cost-effective, adaptable, and capable of delivering immediate progress. It preserves social cohesion and cultural identity, builds trust between citizens and institutions, and aligns with international best practices for post-conflict recovery. In short, it is not only about rebuilding houses, but about rebuilding dignity, memory, and identity within the urban fabric (Dovey & King, 2011).

Sustainable recovery will not be measured by the speed at which structures reappear, but by the depth to which communities are empowered to shape their return. By contrasting the limitations of top-down reconstruction with the potential of bottom-up, human-centred approaches, this study demonstrates that informal settlements, often dismissed as marginal, can in fact serve as a foundation for resilient, inclusive, and culturally grounded urban recovery.

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