

Damascene Conversion Work Gets Mixed Reaction

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A major overhaul of one of the Syrian capital's oldest and most famous markets has proved controversial, with shop owners complaining about the disruption and archaeologists saying builders paid little heed to conserving the past.

Midhet Basha, also known as the "Straight Street" because it is the main artery through Damascus's old town, has been undergoing a complete renovation since late 2007. Once a run-down part of a working-class neighbourhood, Midhet Basha dates back to Roman times and was at one time the city's commercial centre.

The old town was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.

The plan was to complete the revamp of the market by July, in time for events being held for Damascus's year of being the capital of Arab culture. However, several months on, the construction continues.

Led by a Syrian company called Reconstruction, the 148 million lira (three million US dollar) project has refurbished parts of the market, which had suffered decades of neglect.

"Everything that lies under the city is in poor shape," the project's executive director, Abu Samra, told the Damascus-based website Syria News. "'Old Damascus floats on top of a sea of sewage water, and there are fears it might collapse altogether."

Improvements have certainly been made. Parts of the market refurbished so far have new marble and limestone facades, and the shops have been given wooden doors. Water mains, electricity and phone lines have been replaced.

But the work has not gone smoothly, and the delays and continuing construction have frustrated local people, who say the renovation has been poorly planned and executed.

Amjad al-Ruz, the official in charge of the old town, said the project had been held up by bureaucracy and the difficult working conditions, such as the narrow alleyways and ancient infrastructure. But he said, "We're overcoming this by relying on experts and specialists, and we're working hard every day to finish it up to standard."

As work progressed, some old buildings collapsed, and Roman ruins were discovered underneath.

Joseph Hanna, who monitors violations of the regulations governing antiquities in old Damascus, said the companies brought in to work on the project had insufficient expertise on architecture and archaeology, and did not always report finds.

"Bureaucracy is holding up responses to the reports which we pass on to the municipality to stop violations inside the old wall," said Hanna. "This has caused many archaeological sites to fade before our eyes."

He added that old murals and inscriptions found at the site could be effaced forever by construction materials such as sand.

For the merchants and traders, the disruption caused by the work has been a major headache. Midhat Basha has been covered in potholes, barricades and rubbish, making it difficult to move about and driving away customers, they say.

"We were forced to close the shops for over 20 days, and this cost us big losses," said Muwafaq al-Dib, who has a shop selling "abbaya", the traditional costume worn by women.

He noted that he and other merchants filed a formal complaint and damages claim with the Damascus chamber of commerce, adding, "We haven't received a response."

One of al-Dib's employees, Abu Ahmed, said, "You can say that for almost a year no one did good business at the market. Shops used to make thousands of liras a month, but now it is 400 liras per month."

Although the shiny new sections of the market are in stark contrast to the drab look of the street just a few months ago, some people complain that the work is shoddy. One shop owner claimed the roof over the market was still leaking.

Mohammed Salih, 22, a student at the college of archaeology at Damascus University, is among those who regret the passing of the old.

"When you walk down Midhet Basha market since the renovation, you could well think you've lost your way," he said. "Then you realise the market no longer has anything to do with old Damascus, except for its location."

Vita, 43, a Russian who has lived in Damascus for the last 15 years, agreed that too much had been lost, saying, "I feel as though everything is fake. The place has no spirit. I wish they hadn't renovated it, because it used to be better than it is now."

Yet there are others who praised the renovations, and other changes such as a ban on cars, saying they would improve business in the long run.

"This should have happened long time ago," said Nabil Farah, owner of a restaurant called Al-Guitar in the market.

Farah lost some trade while the work was going on, but insists, "I am happy. The future will make up for it. The [design] taste, the organisation and the joy of seeing old civilisations are what will bring tourists, not new buildings or floors."

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