

Syria's Modern Mud Villages

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A new project is helping to house the displaced.

Displaced from Hama's countryside, Ahmad al-Sheikh was so desperate to find a new home for his family that he was preparing to buy a tent just to provide some shelter.

However, as he travelled to Idlib in search of accommodation, the 37 year-old happened to pass by a new building project: a village of housing units constructed entirely out of mud blocks.

To his delight, al-Sheikh's family was allocated one of the new homes. Not only do they now have a roof over their heads, but they have access to water, sanitation, transport and other services.

The mud village is located in the town of Saraqib in the governorate of Idlib. It is part of a project funded by the **Qatar Red Crescent** and implemented by **Binaa Organisation for Development**.

"The concept of this modern mud village is very simple," executive director Asaad al-Abrash told Damascus Bureau.

"Housing units are built using blocks made out of locally sourced mud.

"Construction does not cost much, nor does it take long. The housing units are safe and warm, and offer residents a dignified quality of life, as opposed to tents which offer no protection from the cold or hot weather."

According to 42 year-old al-Abrash, each housing unit is 36 metres square and costs 1,675 US dollars to build, making them more cost effective than caravans costing 3,500 dollars each. The units all have the same standard design and comprise two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom.

So far around 100 displaced families have been settled in this village and al-Abrash hopes the project will house many more.

"Displacement is a shocking and painful experience. Families are forced to leave their homes and lead primitive lives; many of them feel that they have lost their dignity as well as their homes. We hope to alleviate some of these people's suffering by building these houses for them."

The project aims to construct 2,200 mud houses in various locations. The total cost of the project is around 237,800 dollars, which covers land preparation, infrastructure and construction.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Launched on March 1, 2015, the project's first stage involved finding the best soil combinations for building purposes.

"We needed to identify the best and most suitable type of mud that would withstand high pressure and different weather," project engineer Amer al-Sadeir told Damascus Bureau.

"We managed to figure out how to produce blocks made out of mud and straw," he continued. "These are used to build the walls, then an additional layer of cement is spread over them for fortification. Roofs are made out of wooden boards topped with a layer of mud and covered in thick plastic sheets."

The project employs local construction companies and residents to carry out the block-making and building work, which has also helped the regional economy.

The village is well serviced. New roads connect the houses and there are playgrounds for the children.

A sewage network has been put in place and water is supplied to all houses from a large tank fed by an artesian well. Efforts are underway to secure a large generator to provide houses with electricity.

According to 30 year-old al-Sadeir, beneficiaries are selected with the help of local councils.

"Local councils advertise our projects and invite interested people to submit applications to them. A special committee then looks into these applications and identifies those most in need," he said.

Another resident of Saraqib's mud village is 40 year-old Saeed and his family, who were driven out of their house in Aleppo's countryside by government and Russian airstrikes.

“It was no longer safe for us. Life had become next to impossible, so we fled to a camp for the internally displaced,” he said.

“It was freezing cold in the tents, strong winds battered them day and night, it was like living out in the open. We dreamt of living in a house that would protect us from the elements, and we finally found what we were looking for when we came to this mud village.”

Umm Raed, a widow with three sons, also found a new home at the mud village. The 39 year-old had fled her house in Hama’s countryside after her husband died and was living in a school with 20 more families.

“Living with so many strangers from different backgrounds, with different habits and customs was a terrible experience,” she said.

“We had to share the school bathrooms and kitchen, and had no privacy at all. The water supply was very limited which led to the spread of hygiene-related diseases amongst residents.

“My sons began to pick up bad habits from other boys such as smoking, and I could not control them,” she continued.

When she heard about Saraqib’s mud village, Umm Raed submitted an application and much to her relief was accepted.

“I’m so happy to have gained my independence and to be living in such a well-serviced place,” she said.

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