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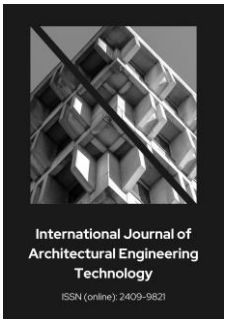

Markets as Mechanisms: The Role of Small Shops in Post-War Urban Recovery

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ABSTRACT

In post-conflict settings, recovery is commonly measured by rebuilt infrastructure and restored governance, yet these metrics overlook subtler forms of resilience rooted in everyday life. This paper argues that the reopening of small shops and the revival of local markets constitute a distinct and measurable axis of recovery, one that restores economic function while reweaving social bonds, cultural memory, and communal dignity. Focusing on Syria, the study reframes commerce as a site of healing where souks and storefronts operate simultaneously as livelihoods, social spaces, and symbolic claims to normalcy and resistance. The paper's novelty lies in linking Syria's historical position on the Silk and Incense Routes with contemporary grassroots market restoration, producing a historically informed framework that treats market revival as both heritage practice and adaptive urban strategy. Methodologically, the research combines ethnographic observation, oral histories, and spatial mapping across detailed case studies—Zamalka and Mukhayyam Al-Yarmouk souks in Damascus and Al-Madinah souk in Aleppo—complemented by comparative analysis of Mostar and Beirut to identify transferable dynamics and divergent trajectories. Findings show that market reopening accelerates informal governance, stimulates micro-enterprise networks, and regenerates public sociability, producing resilience outcomes that conventional reconstruction metrics miss. The paper concludes by proposing policy recommendations for recovery planners and heritage practitioners: prioritize micro-retail capacity building, protect informal trading spaces, and integrate market-sensitive indicators into recovery assessments. The relaunch of commercial services, the study contends, does more than reactivate income streams; it reclaims daily life and reaffirms communal continuity in post-crisis settings.

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1. Introduction

Post-war reconstruction is a complex, multi-stage process aimed at restoring stability, livelihoods and governance in societies ravaged by conflict. Globally, post-conflict recovery efforts prioritize security, humanitarian aid, infrastructure, and governance [1]. Yet these top-down metrics often overlook the everyday spaces where resilience quietly takes root.

On the other hand, Communities shattered by loss of life and mass displacement like Syria, face deep psychological trauma, which continues to hinder collective reconstruction efforts [2].

For the Syrian revolution, when transformed into an armed conflict, economic collapsed and fractured governance. Widespread destruction of urban infrastructure -housing, water networks and health facilities- has not only reduced basic services to a fraction of pre-war levels but also eroded social cohesion [3].

This research highlights how reopening small markets becomes a grassroots act of defiance and a tangible step toward reclaiming urban life. Illuminates several questions: Who defines recovery? What role do local actors play in shaping it? And how do reopened markets reflect not just economic revival, but symbolic reclamation of place and identity? Also this paper broaden analytical horizons on pivotal questions surrounding urban recovery and community agency: Who will decide how and when the real reconstruction process will begin? What is the role of society, government institutions, and local NGOs in the decision-making process? Will the reconstruction process reflect the unique characteristics and priorities of Syrian society in the destroyed areas? (Fig. **1**).

To ground these questions, the next section develops a theoretical framework that links market revival to urban resilience and grassroots reconstruction.

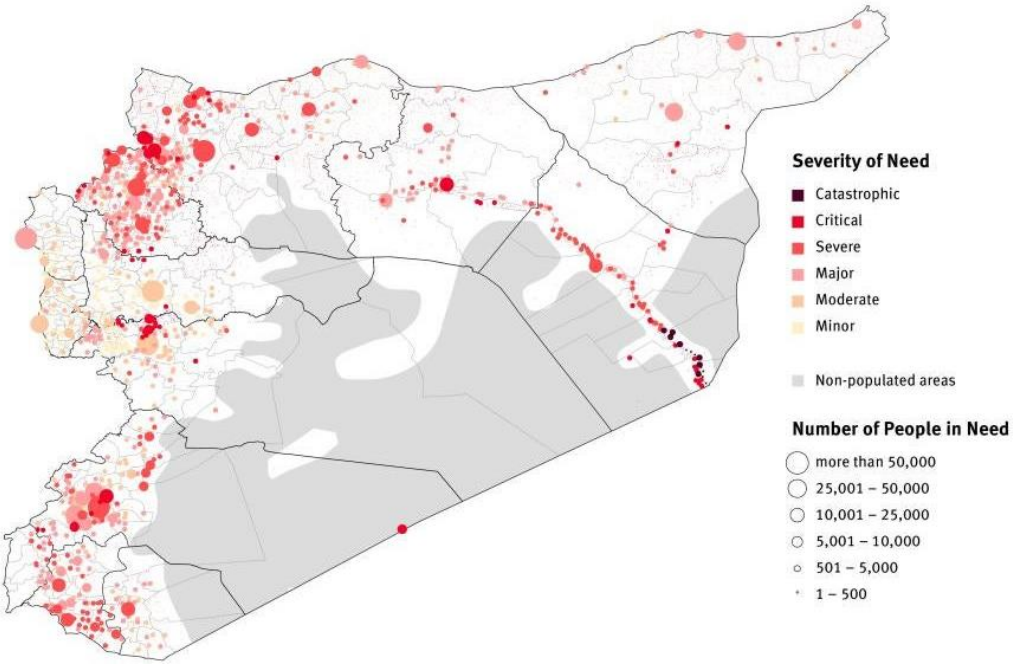

Figure 1: Number of people in need in Syria, and severity of needs [51].

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper frames market-led recovery within an urban resilience perspective, defining urban resilience as the capacity of urban systems to absorb shocks, maintain core functions, adapt routines, and transform institutions to reduce future vulnerability [4, 5]. Small shops and souks operate as everyday urban infrastructure whose revival produces measurable social and economic resilience by re-establishing routines, enabling resource flows, and regenerating networks of reciprocity.

We position grassroots reconstruction as a complementary recovery modality distinct from top-down rebuilding: it consists of locally driven repair, informal governance practices, and iterative adaptation that leverage place-based knowledge and low-capital entry points [6, 7]. Grassroots activity produces adaptive capacity where formal institutions are weak, accelerating return and livelihood restoration.

Three intermediary mechanisms explain how market revival converts local action into resilience outcomes. First, social capital (bonding, bridging, linking) is rebuilt through repeated market interactions that restore trust, norms, and mutual aid, enabling collective action [8]. Second, the informal economy / Everyday Urbanism lens highlights how low-barrier commerce sustains livelihoods and reproduces urban life outside formal channels, permitting rapid economic reactivation [6, 9]. Third, heritage-led regeneration frames souk restoration as identity work that mobilizes place attachment and symbolic continuity, increasing return incentives and collective investment [10, 11].

From these constructs we derive a causal chain and three testable propositions that orient methods and analysis: Market reopening → ① Renewed routines and exchange → ② Rebuilding social capital and informal governance → ③ Enhanced adaptive capacity and localized recovery. The framework guides indicator selection (social, economic, institutional) and analytic steps (mapping reopening, coding oral histories for social-capital signals, comparing heritage vs non-heritage corridors). Embedding empirical work in this framework clarifies mechanisms, tightens causal inference, and links findings directly to policy levers that strengthen urban resilience via market-sensitive interventions.

3. Methodology

The following mixed-methods design tests three theory-driven propositions derived from the previous section's framework. First: historical-ethnographic analysis, it maps the substantial history of commerce in Syria. Second: spatial and socio-economic assessment, it situates three important and viral markets that were severely damaged within the Syrian context during the war, "Zamalka and Mukhayyam al-Yarmouk" in Damascus are considered important Souks to point out and highlight them as case studies due to the severe damage, database availability and sightseeing by the author, as well as the importance of the population's decision in the economic aspect of the recovery process, which directly serves the research main idea side by side to the grand market "Al-Madinah" in Aleppo. Third: case studies, presenting several local and global experiences on post-war market reconstruction. Finally, Applying the objective on the Western Damascus countryside "Qudsaya main Souk" as an applicable case study, Analyzing the economic, social, and spatial dynamics of residents' efforts to return and rebuild. To operate the theoretical framework, the researcher identified five core concepts -urban resilience, grassroots reconstruction, social capital, informal economy, and heritage regeneration- and translated them into measurable indicators. Table **1** summarizes these concepts, their roles in the study, and the corresponding indicators and data sources used in the analysis.

Table 1: Operational indicators derived from theoretical framework.

Concept	Definition	Role in Paper	Operational Indicator(s)	Data Source(s)
Urban resilience	Capacity to absorb, adapt, and transform	Evaluative lens for recovery outcomes	Rate of shop reopenings; returnee population density	Satellite imagery; municipal records
Grassroots reconstruction	Locally driven repair and adaptation	Mode of recovery	Community initiatives; informal repair activity	Field observation; interviews
Social capital	Networks of trust and reciprocity	Mechanism linking markets to resilience	Frequency of public interactions; mutual aid incidents	Oral histories; coded interviews
Informal economy	Low-barrier commerce outside formal regulation	Pathway for livelihood restoration	% unregistered businesses; micro-enterprise counts	Market surveys; NGO reports
Heritage regeneration	Restoration of cultural identity via place	Incentive for return and investment	Heritage-status reopenings; tourism footfall	UNESCO/AKTC reports; project data

4. Analysis

4.1. History of Trading Roads in Syria

Shops and trade markets in Syria have been more than just places of commerce, they've been the beating heart of its cities, shaping culture, identity, and international influence for millennia.

Syria's strategic position at the crossroads of major ancient trade routes of *Asia, Europe, and Africa* fostered a rich and complex commercial history and made it a vital hub for ancient trade routes like the Silk Road and Incense Route, driving the exchange of goods, cultures, and ideas. This legacy reflects the influence of successive civilizations and pivotal historical events that have shaped trade dynamics and mindset of Syrian people over the centuries [12].

4.1.1. Silk Road

The Silk Road emerged in the late 2nd century BCE when the Han Dynasty officially opened trade with the West, creating a network of overland and maritime routes that linked China to the Mediterranean world. (Fig. **2**) These routes remained in use for roughly fifteen centuries, facilitating not only the exchange of silk, spices, and metals but also ideas, religions, and technologies. Trade along this network was never a single, continuous corridor; rather, it comprised segmented paths managed by different merchant groups, with the Han and subsequent states levying customs dues on goods passing through their territories [13, 14].

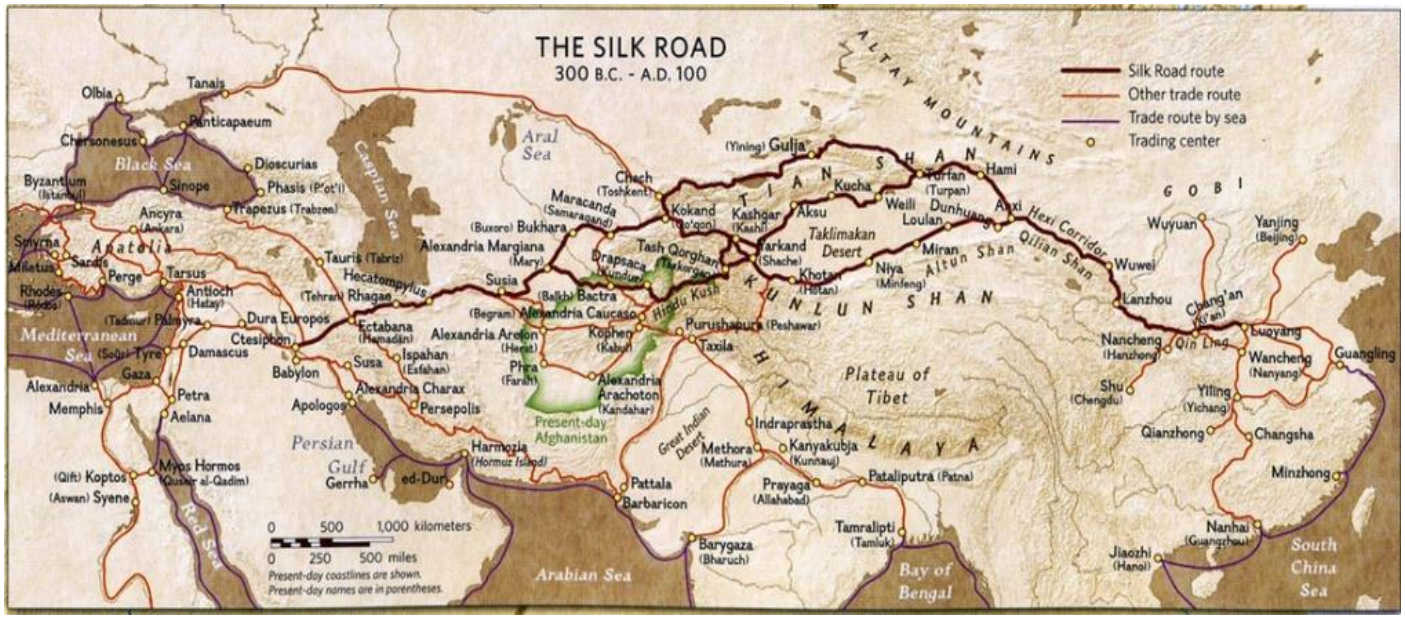

Figure 2: Silk road cities [52].

4.1.1.1. Syrian Segments of the Silk Road

Syria occupied a pivotal position at the junction of northern routes from Anatolia and Mesopotamia and southern passages from the Arabian Peninsula. By the 3rd millennium BCE, Aleppo (ancient Halab) had already become a regional entrepôt. Under the Seleucids (3rd century BCE) and later the Romans, Aleppo flourished as a caravan hub connecting Central Asia to the Mediterranean. Its historic souks and the Citadel's vast bazaar testify to this legacy of continuous commerce [15].

4.1.1.2. Damascus and Silk Dyeing Traditions

Damascus gained renown for its silk craftsmanship and dyeing techniques, learned and refined through Silk-Road exchanges. Until the early 21st century, families like that of Mohamad Rihawi practiced hand-dyeing processes passed down over generations, (Fig. **3**) producing the famed Damascene Brocade. These artisanal

methods—immersing silk in colored baths and drying it on rooftop terraces—underscore how Silk-Road interactions shaped local textile arts [16].

Figure 3: Mohamad Rihawi production of the famed Damascene Brocade [53].

4.1.2. The Incense Route

The Incense Route was an ancient network of overland and maritime corridors that linked the deep-south Arabian and Horn of Africa sources of frankincense, myrrh, spices, and luxury goods to Mediterranean markets. (Fig. **4**) It flourished roughly between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, enabling not only trade in high-value aromatics but also the exchange of ideas, religions, and technologies across Afro-Eurasia [17].

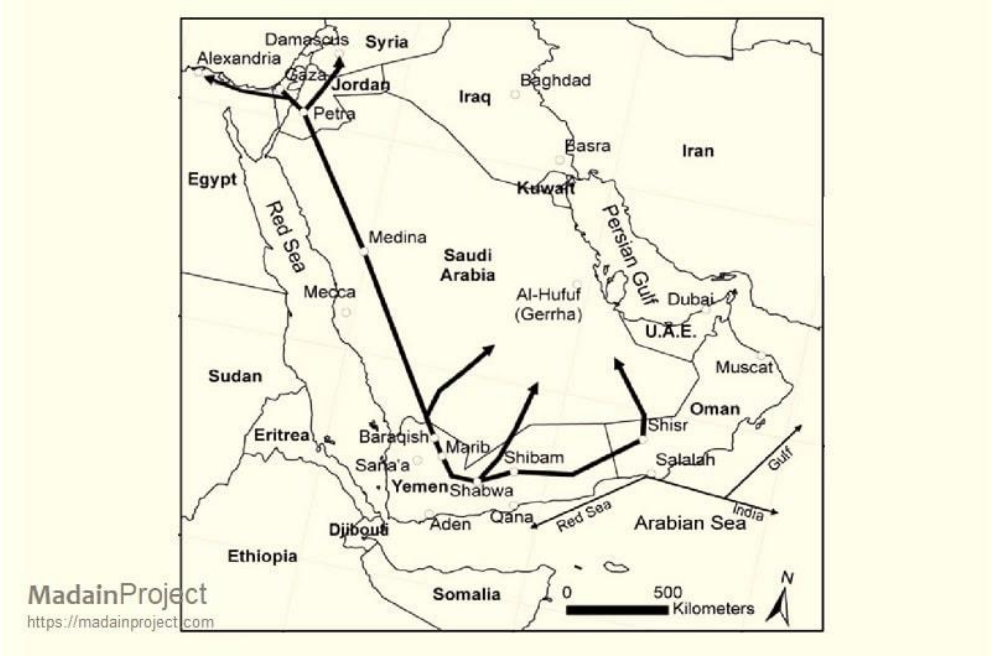

Figure 4: The incense route [54].

4.1.2.1. Syrian Segments and Key Nodes

Within Syria, the route entered from the Arabian Desert and traversed the Syrian steppe and desert fringe, connecting a series of caravan stations, fortified waystations, and urban entrepôts. Major hubs included:

a. Palmyra (Tadmur) – a prime redistribution center linking eastern caravans to Roman Syria

b. Resafa (Sergiopolis) – a fortified oasis station on the desert flank

c. Bosra – an important junction toward the Levantine coast

d. Damascus – final Mediterranean gateway where goods were loaded onto ships or dispersed inland [18].

4.2. Resilience Through Conflict

4.2.1. The Pre-War Syrian Bustling Markets

Before the civil war, Syria's modern markets, particularly the historic souks, were vibrant centers of commerce and culture, they were integral to the economy and social fabric, known for their diverse offerings and lively atmosphere [19].

Souks were gathering places, especially during holidays and religious festivals “Eid”, where people mingled, exchanged stories, and celebrated. They played a key role in community cohesion, acting as informal meeting points and cultural anchors.

Whereas many souks specialized in heritage crafts like copper whitening, molasses squeezing, leather tanning, and Arab sewing. The Al-A’tareen Souk in Homs, for example, housed over 5,000 types of herbs, oils, and perfumes in a single shop [20].

4.2.2. Targeted Attacks on Markets During War

Widespread, The Syrian civil war exacted a severe toll on retail infrastructure -markets and small shops were often deliberate targets of shelling, air strikes, and looting -leaving vast swathes of urban and rural retail networks in ruins. (Fig. **5**). Conflict actors repeatedly struck civilian commercial areas. According to World Vision, markets- alongside hospitals and schools- were systematically bombarded or strafed, contributing to an estimated 60-70 percent collapse of local retail supply chains. The destruction of shops not only cuts off critical access to food and medicine but also erased livelihoods for thousands of shopkeepers and their families [21].

Figure 5: Shops and stalls in the medieval souk area of Aleppo 2011 [55].

4.2.2.1. Zamalka’s Souk Destruction

- **Background**

Basically, Zamalka is a town just 3.5 kilometers east-northeast of Old Damascus, has deep historical roots, dating back to at least the early 13th century. It was an agricultural city in the past and, as it represents part of the Ghouta region. Its proximity to the capital made it a vital area, both commercially and strategically. Lately with the expansion of urbanization in Damascus and its countryside, it transformed into a residential area whose people worked in crafts, construction, and commerce. Playing a significant role in the daily lives of its residents and contributing to the economic fabric of the region, souks spread among the main streets forming a vibrant axis alongside.

- **War Impact**

Like many areas, due to the battles that took place in Zamalka during the war period (March 2011 until March 2021) including the horrific 2013 chemical weapons attack, the region including the markets ware severely destroyed [22] (Fig. **6**).

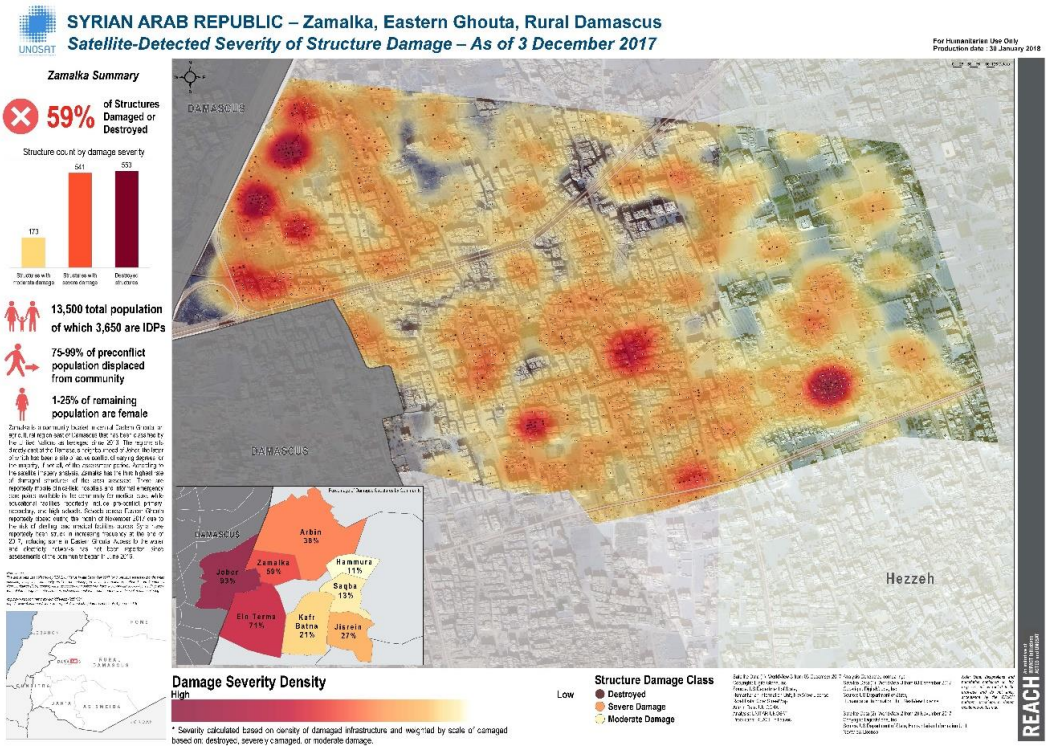

Figure 6: Detected severity of structure damage in Zamalka [56].

Zamalka had the third-highest rate of damage in the Eastern Ghouta area assessed by the UN in December. The war has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of Zamalka with around 59% of buildings had been partially damaged or destroyed [23].

- **Recovery Efforts**

[A]FA has been collaborating with the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Damascus and the Damascus-based Reparametrize Foundation -as part of their ongoing project Recoding Post-War-Syria, Zamalka (2020-2021)- Under a joined workshop named “Damascus Dialogues” the Author had a chance to visit Zamalka in a sightseeing journey after the end of military affairs in 2020. This short trip reveled an unexpected image of a man reopened his shop in a severely damaged building in the main souk nearby the grand mosque, selling fruits and vegetables to locals and sharing hope [24].

These photos offer a powerful description of the will of people who know no defeat. Under harsh and unsafe conditions, this shop owner decided to return to his devastated neighborhood and start a new life filled with challenges. Risking his own safety, he decided to be part of the revival of this area and represent the concepts of resistance and steadfastness. As evidenced in Zamalka, the reopening of fruit and vegetable stalls amid rubble (Fig. **7**) exemplifies Proposition ①, where market activity reintroduces daily routines and economic exchange despite infrastructural devastation.

4.2.2.2. Al-Madinah’s Souk in Rubble

- **Background**

Aleppo was the commercial heart of Syria and considered the unofficial economical capital.

The most famous, *the Al-Madina Souk* in Aleppo, is nothing short of legendary, Dates back to the 14th century, though its roots stretch even further into Aleppo’s Silk Road legacy [16]. A 13-kilometer labyrinth of vaulted alleys, once hailed as the largest covered historic market in the world [25]. It wasn’t just a place to buy and sell—it was the heartbeat of Aleppo’s cultural, social, and economic life.

Figure 7: Zamalka [57].

Hosted over 1,600 shops before the war, selling everything from Aleppo soap and brocade textiles to jewelry, spices, and handmade shoes.

It was a melting pot of ethnicities and religions, where Armenians, Persians, Arabs, and Europeans traded side by side. The souk was also a social space for storytelling, celebration, and community bonding [26].

- **War Impact**

In September 2012 Aleppo's historic covered bazaar -*al-Madinah*- was consumed by a massive fire and further damaged by shelling. UNESCO reported that 34 of the 45 souqs suffered severe damage, and about 1,500 shops were lost [26].

Before-and-after imagery shows entire vaulted corridors reduced to heaps of stone and collapsed wooden beams. (Fig. **8**) By 2016, only a few dozen vendors risked reopening amid the ruins; the vast majority remained displaced or destitute. These ruined souk images have become emblematic of Syria's broader commercial collapse [27].

Figure 8: The damage in Aleppo's Old Souks before and after the war [58].

- **Recovery Efforts**

Since 2019, gradual restoration efforts have revived several sections, including Souq Saqatiyeh and Khan al-Harir.

Local artisans, NGOs like the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and returning residents have led the charge, honoring scars rather than erasing them [28]. forming informal coalitions to guide souk restoration, a clear signal of bridging and linking social capital where Proposition ② is reflected.

Today, over 380 shops have reopened, and the souk is once again a place of commerce, memory, and hope [28].

4.2.2.3. Mukhayyam al-Yarmouk Demolition

- **Background**

Al-Mukhayyam was established in 1957 as an "unofficial" Palestinian refugee camp on an 8 km² agricultural land (Shaghour Orchards) and developed without a formal planning scheme within Damascus [29]. Before 2011 it housed around 160,000 of Palestinian and Syrian residents and functioned as a thriving urban district rather than a tented settlement. Two main thoroughfares -Yarmouk Street and Falasteen Street- were lined with hundreds of family-run shops, markets, cafés and service taxis, making the camp one of Damascus's key commercial hubs [30, 31].

- **War Impact**

In December 2012, fighting between opposition factions (notably the Free Syrian Army and PFLP-GC) and pro-regime forces engulfed the camp. (Fig. **9**) By July 2013 a full siege was imposed, severing supply lines for food, water and fuel. As armed groups entrenched themselves, shopkeepers shuttered their businesses; storefronts became positions of defense or were abandoned when shelling and sniper fire made passage along Yarmouk Street impossible [30, 32].

Figure 9: Mukhayyam Al Yarmouk immense destruction [59].

The situation worsened in early 2015, when ISIS fighters overran the southern sector of Yarmouk. Looting and deliberate demolition of shop façades accompanied the battle for control. Many of the market stalls along the main souk were stripped of goods; awnings, signs and display windows were torn down for firewood or to clear fields of fire. By this point, only a handful of vendors risked returning under intermittent truces, and those who did found their shops half-ruined and devoid of inventory [33].

In April–May 2018, Syrian government forces launched a major offensive using airstrikes, barrel bombs and heavy artillery to retake the camp. Entire blocks around the central souk were reduced to rubble. Footpaths once busy with shoppers became craters; underground bakeries and grocery stores were buried. An eyewitness

described finding "nothing but collapsed concrete shells and scorched merchandise" where vibrant shops once stood [34]. Over 60% of the camp's buildings were damaged or destroyed during the war [35].

- **Recovery Efforts**

UNRWA has reopened two schools, a health center, and a new Yarmouk Services Centre to provide education, healthcare, and social support [32]. However, essential services are still limited, and many residents live in makeshift conditions, some shops use bed sheets instead of doors [35]. Despite this limitation, Proposition ② appears in reopened shops which facilitated peer-to-peer support and informal coordination among residents.

4.3. Grassroots Reconstruction

4.3.1. Small Shops as Spaces of Healing

-Why Trade Markets Matter in the Reconstruction Phase?

It's essential to look at the broader context of Damascus's ancient markets, or souks in order to answer this question specifically. These historical markets are not merely places of commerce but living museums, echoing centuries of trade, craftsmanship, and cultural exchange. They represent a fundamental aspect of Syrian identity and heritage.

-For A Syrian Situation, Why Markets are Above Other Facilities?

- **Economic Survival**: For many families, reopening a shop is the fastest way to generate income when formal employment is scarce [36], where hundreds of thousands of displaced families are suffering from a severe shortage of resources and financial support. They rush to open their own shops at the first opportunity to meet their daily needs and then look forward to modestly renovating their homes.
- **Low Barrier to Entry**: Compared to large businesses, small shops require less capital and infrastructure to restart [36]. With property deeds providing official proof of ownership, the optimal and quickest solution is to renovate the commercial premises with available resources and begin operations as soon as they are ready, regardless of any other risks associated with the safety of the premises and the visitors.

  Necessity is the primary driver of such hazardous work.

Therefore, the above leads us to a more comprehensive view in answering the research questions, in contexts of collective trauma like war-torn communities, small shops help restore social and psychological well-being by:

- **Reestablishing routine and normalcy:** The act of shopping or selling daily essentials recreates rhythms of pre-crisis life, offering stability.
- **Fostering social capital:** Regular interactions at the counter nurture mutual support networks, reduce isolation, and rebuild trust among residents.
- **Providing symbolic reconstruction:** Reviving a storefront signifies resilience, sending a public message that life—and community—persists despite destruction.
- **Functioning as informal therapy spaces:** Casual conversations over tea or purchases allow shared storytelling, collective mourning, and peer-to-peer encouragement [37].

4.3.2. World-Wide Case Studies of Souks Renovation after Conflict

4.3.2.1. Aleppo, Syria – Souk al-Saqatiyya 2018-2019

Souk al-Saqatiyya is part of Aleppo's UNESCO-listed Old City, reflecting centuries of Mamluk and Ottoman architecture. Although The Souk al-Saqatiyya rehabilitation project is a post-war pilot project within the Aga Khan Trust for Culture's (AKTC) broader initiative to rehabilitate the historic central Souk in the Old City, it stands as the first completed project in Aleppo's post-war rehabilitation process [38].

- **Restoration**: Led by Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), in collaboration with UNESCO and local authorities (Fig. **10**).
- **Scope**: Rehabilitated 52 shops and 150 meters of passageways in the heart of Aleppo's Old City, with an impact of sparking a ripple effect /277/shops reopened, and over 500 meters of souk infrastructure were restored.
- **Recognition**: Won the ICCROM-Sharjah Award for Best Practice in Cultural Heritage Conservation.
- **Importance**: In post-conflict WHCs the reconstruction process needs to find a balance between preservation and development. A revitalization approach to create the connection and transition point between relief phase and post-conflict development phase [39].

  The restoration of Souk al-Saqatiyya in Aleppo is far more than a physical repair, it's a symbolic and strategic cornerstone in Syria's post-war recovery addressing proposition ①. Its restoration preserves intangible heritage -craftsmanship, urban memory, and communal rituals- that define Aleppo's identity. At the end, reviving this market reactivates micro-economies, supports artisans, and encourages displaced residents to return and rebuild livelihoods.

Figure 10: Souk al-Saqatiyya rehabilitation [60].

4.3.2.2. Beirut, Lebanon – Souk El Tayeb 2004

After the Lebanese Civil War, the first farmers' market in Lebanon became an emblem of unity and sustainable development, providing a platform for communities to reconnect and rebuild after the civil war. This market played a vital role in the city's post-war reconstruction and continues to be a symbol of resilience, established to preserve Lebanese food traditions and support local farmers [40].

- **The visionary founder:** KAMAL MOUZAVAK, is a Lebanese born to a family of farmers and producers from the rural town of Mouzawak- He grew up in a culture that lived from the land and celebrated food and the importance of having a space to share this food with others [40].
- **Scope**: Promoted local agriculture, culinary heritage, and intercommunal dialogue: The Souk El Tayeb project was created to preserve food traditions and the culture of small farming in Lebanon, with the aim to protect the interests of the local small farmers and producers, enabling them to compete fairly in an era of globalized agricultural trade [30].
- **Importance**: Helped rebuild trust and economic resilience through food and craft-based micro-enterprises: The Souk El Tayeb vision was to become a place for exchanges and dialogue to build up a common sense of citizenship among diverse communities, demonstrating Proposition③. Supported small-scale farmers and producers and launch of local community-level development initiatives [40] (Fig. **11**).

Figure 11: Souk El Tayeb of Beirut [61].

4.3.2.3. Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina – Old Bazaar Kujundžiluk

This Souk was Established in the 16th century, Kujundžiluk was the commercial heart of Ottoman Mostar, with over 500 workshops crafting copperware, textiles, and jewelry [41]. It runs along cobbled streets near the iconic Stari Most (Old Bridge), forming part of Mostar's UNESCO-listed Old Town. During the 1992–1995 Bosnian War, the area suffered extensive shelling and destruction, including the collapse of the Old Bridge in 1993.

- **Restoration**: Post-1990s war, the Ottoman-era bazaar was rebuilt to preserve cultural identity and boost tourism. Whereas Post-war restoration in the early 2000s, was led by UNESCO, local authorities, and international donors [41].
- **Scope**: Revived artisanal trades and attracted international visitors, supporting local livelihoods: The restoration focused on Preserving Ottoman architecture: stone facades, wooden shutters, and cobbled alleys. Secondly, Rehabilitating artisan shops and Finally Improving infrastructure: drainage, lighting, and pedestrian access were modernized without compromising heritage aesthetics.
- **Importance:** Today, Kujundžiluk is a car-free zone bustling with local artisans, cafés, and cultural events. It attracts thousands of visitors annually, supporting micro-enterprises and cultural tourism. At the end, the bazaar has become a symbol of Mostar's rebirth, blending commerce, memory, and identity supporting Proposition ② (Fig. **12**).

Figure 12: Bazar Kujundžiluk in Bosnia and Herzegovina [62].

4.3.3. Quantifying Urban Recovery Themes

To better understand the relative strengths in each theme of urban recovery across different cities, we can visualize their performance. The following radar chart provides a comparative overview, reflecting the opinionated analysis of their recovery efforts based on the information provided (Fig. **13**).

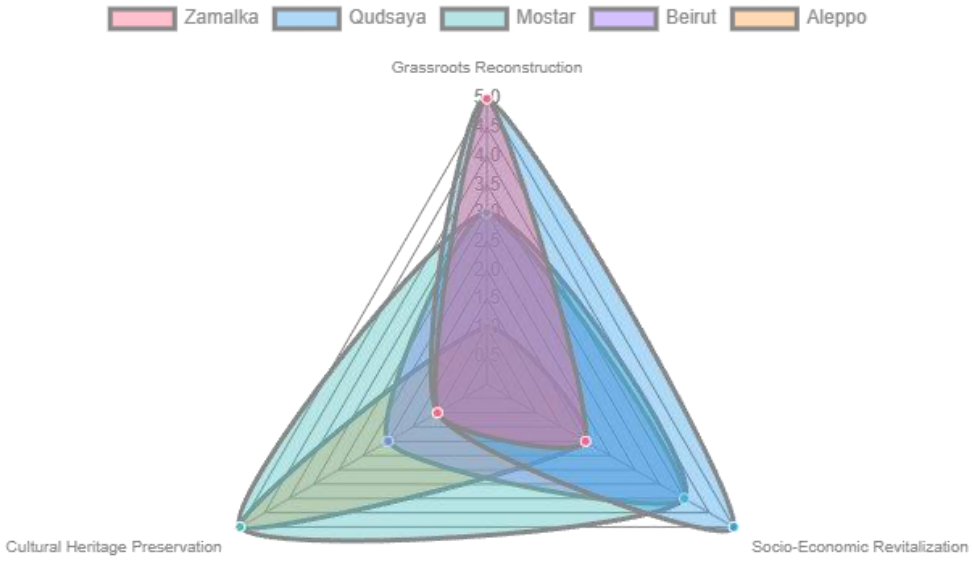

Figure 13: The differing strengths of five studied cities across the three key themes of urban recovery.

This radar chart illustrates the differing strengths of five cities across the three key themes of urban recovery. Zamalka and Qudsaya excel in "Grassroots Reconstruction," demonstrating high community-led engagement. Mostar and Aleppo show strong performance in "Cultural Heritage Preservation," highlighting the importance of historical restoration. Beirut maintains moderate scores across grassroots and socio-economic revitalization. This visualization underscores that urban recovery is rarely uniform, with cities specializing or excelling in different aspects based on their unique contexts and challenges.

5. Case Study Discussion

5.1. Qudsaya's Local Souk

- **Background**

Qudsaya is a Syrian city in Rif Dimashq Governorate and is located on the western slope of Mount Qasioun, 7 km west of Damascus (Fig. **14**). A transformed region from agricultural lands and orchards to formal-informal settlements, Qudsaya has faced many urban and social changes that affected the culture and nature of its inhabitants over time (Fig. **15**).

Figure 14: Road maps of Damascus, Qudsaya studied area.

Figure 15: Pictures of Qudsaya [63].

Like many towns around Damascus, Qudsaya developed as a satellite community* during the late Ottoman period, benefiting from its proximity to the capital. Qudsaya also is home to a significant Circassian community, descendants of refugees who fled the Caucasus during the Russian invasion in the 1860s. These groups settled in Syria under Ottoman rule and maintained a distinct cultural identity [42].

- **War Impact**

In 2012 the town was taken by the rebels during the war and blockaded by the government. A truce ending the blockade was reached in November 2013 [43].

During the siege, the residents of the area suffered from starvation and terror through heavy artillery shelling until the regime forces stormed the city in 2013. The forces burned most of the houses after displacing the city's residents and stealing their belongings, in addition to burning all the shops in the central Qudsaya market (Fig. **16**), as this market was a vital and essential hub for the residents of this area. All kinds of goods and products were sold there, and it was an important social and commercial center that distinguished this city before 2011.

5.2. Analytical Study

- **Socio-Urban Characteristics**

Satellite imagery reveals the mixed formal-informal settlement characteristics of the study area in Qudsaya, showing the left parts of original farmlands in the north (Fig. **17**). The area of the main souk witnessed successive

*__Satellite community:__ refers to a smaller urban area that is located near a larger metropolitan center and is economically or socially dependent on it. These communities often emerge to accommodate population overflow, provide housing, or support industrial or logistical functions that the main city cannot absorb.

Figure 16: Pictures of the main Qudsaya Souk grand fire [64].

Figure 17: Satellite images of case study [65].

urban and social changes from 2000 until 2025. Since the displacement of the Iraqi people and their adoption of the Qudsaya area as a refuge after the Iraq war. The markets became crowded, which had a positive impact on the demand for shopping in the central markets, and on the economic activity in the town. The indigenous population was influenced by Iraqi culture in terms of gathering places, cafes and squares, and various types of food. The flourishing influence continued until the war began in the region, when purchasing power declined with the migration of the Iraqi people and the onset of successive crises in the Qudsaya region.

As the population of the northeastern region in Syria was displaced to Qudsaya and gathered there in large groups, their numbers continued to increase as the fighting intensified in the northeast and the population was displaced from Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah cities. They found in Qudsaya a haven and suitable environment, which Iraqi people had previously influenced, facilitating the integration of the new arrivals.

Currently, Syrians from Deir ez-Zor city constitute the largest proportion of the Qudsaya area's population. Side by side to the old residents, they are a key factor in the socio-economic revitalization of the central markets, house rentals, and vital communities, especially in the proposed study area.

- **Recovery Efforts**

Proposition ③ is demonstrated in Qudsaya, the souk's revival through community-led efforts illustrates how grassroots reconstruction fosters spatial and economic recovery, with Assad's forces having concluded their military actions against rebels in Qudsaya, they pulled back, enabling a phased return of the city's inhabitants. Upon their return, a priority was cleaning the central market and removing fire debris with rudimentary. This demonstrated the Syrians' determination to persevere and recover from adversity.

- **Learned Lessons**

Qudsaya's leading scorer in socio-economic revitalization can be attributed to its strategic location and the rapid return of its displaced residents, on account to the infrastructures' good conditions compared to other areas that have been severely destroyed by the regime forces. This highlights how a combination of geographical advantages and successful reintegration of populations can quickly inject life back into a local economy. Linking proposition①, the ability to quickly reactivate local markets and services is key to providing livelihoods and encouraging further return.

- **Architectural Proposal**

  - Design Inspiration

Inspired by a similar experiment conducted by the Damascus Governorate before the fall of the Assad regime, cut off the Shaalan axis to vehicles from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM each night, dedicating the road to pedestrians only, as it is a central market in the Shaalan area and a major axis for pedestrians and marketgoers. This experiment was positively received by citizens, especially young people, as it allowed them to enjoy the experience more, away from the noise and interruption of pedestrian movement. It also greatly benefited the neighborhood's residents, who had previously suffered from excessive car noise throughout the night Based on the mentioned experiment, the researcher proposes cutting off vehicle traffic from the main market axis in Qudsaya which is about 200 meters long (Fig. **14**), as it severely impedes pedestrian movement through the crowded market and causes traffic congestion, especially during rush hour. Accordingly, vehicles would be diverted to further side roads, and the market axis would be designated for pedestrians only.

  - Design Concept and Technical Implications

In the context of revitalizing the popular market within the proposed area, considering the market's vital commercial importance as a commercial center and popular meeting place for the region's residents, the researcher proposes the establishment of organized and structured service units in the central area to serve as points of sale along the axis. These organized units replace the random stalls on both sides of the road that obstruct pedestrian movement. They also provide seating for pedestrians as separation zones between points of sale, providing gathering points, rest areas, and storytelling opportunities (Fig. **18**).

The popular market axis, via covered units, connects the two main plazas. The researcher proposes rehabilitating the two plazas to serve as gathering and launching points for the axis. The two plazas serve as a gathering point for neighborhood residents and visitors to relax and chat, serving the community's fundamental desire to gather and meet, alongside shopping (Fig. **19**).

Providing a breakdown of the tent structure and its components, along with how they function together, Dimensions are in meter (Fig. **20**).

1. **PVC-Coated Fabric (Canopy Layer):** A smooth surface and flexibility make it suitable for both tensioned and draped applications.
2. **Framing Structure (Metal Skeleton):** The skeletal form supports the canopy evenly, preventing sagging and enhancing wind resistance.
3. **Geometry (Top-Down Layout):** The assembled tent gives a clear idea of the final product where design aesthetics are clean, functional, and possibly modular.

- **Design Importance**

This proposal aims to strengthen the small business economy while reviving the special memory of the place, through storytelling related to the market's past during the war and the looting, theft, and burning that shopkeepers endured by Illustrating all paper's propositions ①②③. While people's efforts have succeeded in restoring the market to its former glory after restoration, the researcher's proposal seeks to present a more advanced concept inspired by the study case "Souk El-Tayeb in Beirut" that combines economy and society,

offering visitors a better experience (Fig. **21**). This experience assembles comfort with commerce, gathering with movement, and gathers memories of the past with visions of the future.

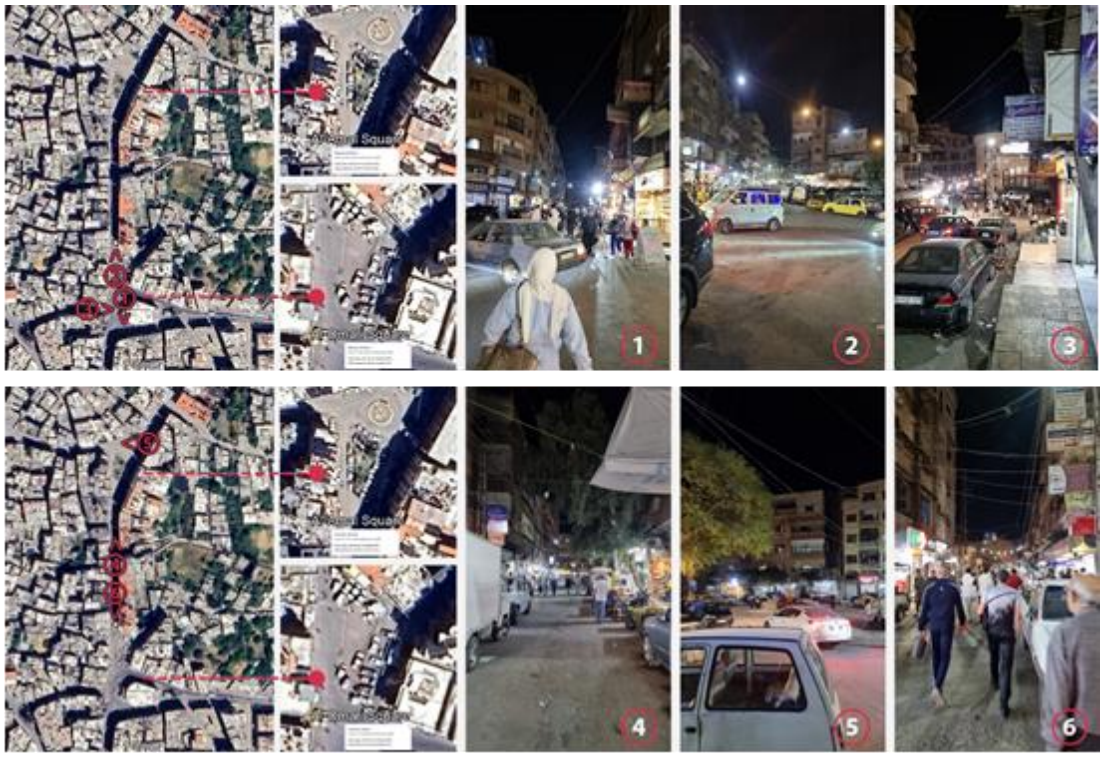

Figure 18: Main souk and squares in the studied axis in Qudsaya.

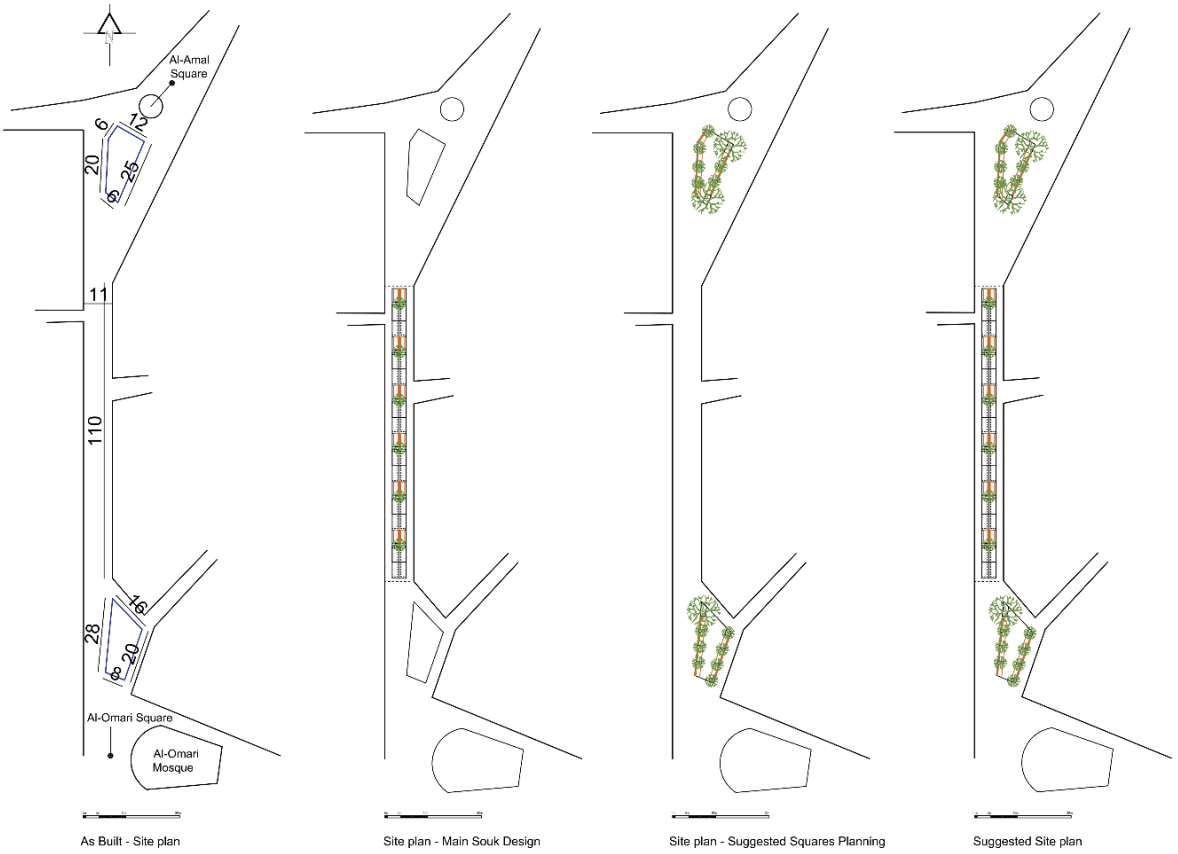

Figure 19: Site plan proposal for the case study.

Figure 20: Proposed tent structural visualization.

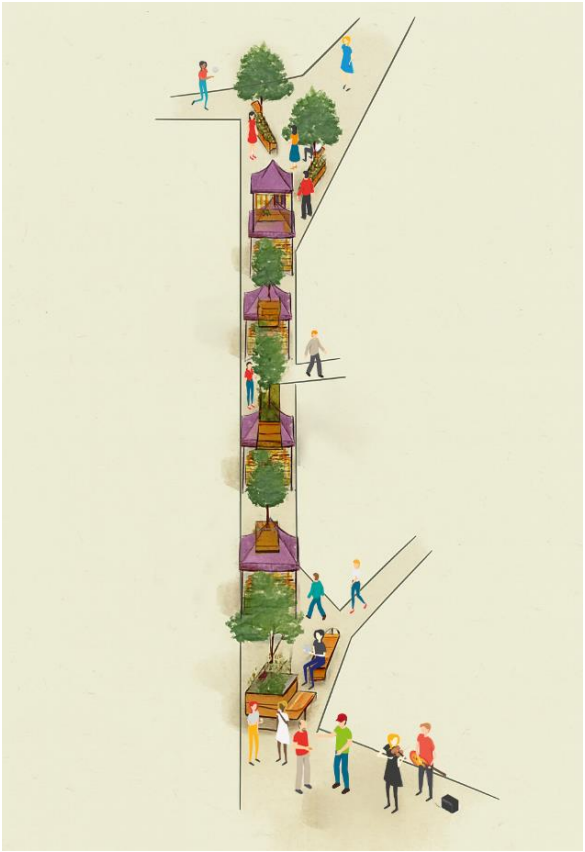

Figure 21: Conceptual illustration for the linear micro-market in Qudsaya.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

To sum up the study, it's important to highlight the concept of inclusive urban recovery in Syria that faces formidable challenges stemming from years of conflict, displacement, and economic collapse. As mentioned above, in post-conflict community, the revival of small shops is pivotal for cultural continuity in which Policymakers can catalyze this rebound through targeted regulations, fiscal incentives, and infrastructure support by adopting a multi-pronged strategy that addresses both immediate needs and long-term sustainability [44, 45]. The strategy would be following these steps:

Enhance Access to Finance: Small shop owners need reliable, affordable capital to restock inventory, repair premises, and invest in basic equipment. Policymakers can:

- Establish microfinance programs and credit guarantee funds that lower collateral requirements.
- Offer temporary tax breaks or input subsidies to reduce operating costs.
- Partner with international donors to leverage matching grants for shop upgrades.

Streamline the Regulatory Framework: Burdensome licensing and opaque regulations push many micro-entrepreneurs into informality. Reforms should:

- Simplify and digitize registration processes to cut approval times and fees.
- Create one-stop shops—physical or online—for all business permits and renewals.
- Review and amend outdated rules through independent legal committees to boost transparency and fairness.

Build Entrepreneurial Capacity: Beyond funding, shop owners need skills in finance, marketing, and technology. Targeted programs can:

- Provide hands-on training in digital tools, bookkeeping, inventory management, and e-commerce.
- Deploy mobile "business clinics" that travel to towns, offering on-site coaching and mentorship.
- Foster peer networks or cooperatives where shopkeepers share best practices and bulk-purchase inputs.

Invest in Market Infrastructure and Services: Half of Syria's productive infrastructure—roads, power plants, market halls—has been damaged or destroyed. Rehabilitating essential services is critical [46]:

- Prioritize repairs of local roads and transport links to reduce supply-chain costs.
- Restore reliable electricity and water in commercial neighborhoods [47].
- Develop safe, covered market spaces with storage facilities and shared amenities.

Strengthen Market Linkages: Connecting small shops to suppliers and consumers enhances resilience and competitiveness:

- Promote community-based cooperatives that link retailers with local producers (e.g., farmers, artisan craftspeople).
- Facilitate trade fairs and online marketplaces where shopkeepers meet regional wholesalers and diaspora buyers.
- Support public–private partnerships to integrate small shops into broader value chains.

Ensure Anti-Corruption and Legal Protections: Restoring trust is essential for attracting investment and encouraging entrepreneurship:

- Consider hybrid models (e.g., community-led planning with technical support) in areas with contested authority [46].
- Enforce transparent procurement and licensing processes, with clear criteria and public audits [47].
- Implement strong legal protections against arbitrary closures or asset seizures.
- Launch public awareness campaigns on citizens' rights and grievance mechanisms.

While international NGOs contribute expertise, funding, and community engagement to scale these initiatives by:

- Forging market linkages that connect retailers to local producers and diaspora buyers.
- Building local leadership through modular capacity-building and mobile business clinics.
- Coordinating multi-stakeholder networks to align donor funding with grassroots needs.
- Establishing monitoring, evaluation, and legal aid mechanisms to ensure sustained, inclusive growth.

Finally, Heritage-conscious commerce restoration weaves together economic revitalization and cultural identity to create resilient urban futures by:

- Rehabilitating historic marketplaces and traditional crafts districts, cities can attract sustainable tourism and diaspora investment while preserving local vernacular architecture and artisanal skills; this fusion of commerce and heritage not only generates diversified livelihoods and strengthens small-shop networks but also fosters social cohesion through shared ownership of cultural assets, empowers communities via participatory planning, and reinforces a sense of place that buffers against future shocks and underpins long-term recovery.
- International frameworks (CURE, Sendai, PDNA) offer scalable models for Syrian contexts, especially if adapted to local governance and community structures [48].
- Using cultural festivals and workshops to revitalize intangible heritage and rebuild social networks [48].

Embedding heritage-conscious commerce restoration into this framework preserves historic marketplaces and artisanal traditions, bolstering social cohesion and adaptive urban resilience [49, 50].

By weaving together public policy, NGO support, and heritage-led strategies, Syria can reconstruct vibrant, sustainable urban economies resilient to future challenges.

Ethics & Permissions

a. Ethical Approval

This study followed standard ethical practices for field research in conflict-affected settings, prioritizing participant safety, informed consent, confidentiality, and the lawful use of secondary materials.

Local authorization: Field visits and outreach were coordinated with local community leaders and municipal offices in Zamalka and Qudsaya before data collection began.

Minimizing harm: Sensitive topics were avoided where respondents indicated distress.

b. Confidentiality, Anonymization, and Data Handling

Publication: Any direct quotations used in the manuscript have been edited to remove identifying details. Photographs published with identifiable individuals were used only with documented permission or when people could not be identified.

Data availability: Non-identifiable aggregate data and the anonymized interview codebook can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to ethical restrictions protecting participant confidentiality.

c. Permissions for Secondary Data, Imagery, and Archival Sources

Satellite and NGO maps: Use of satellite damage assessments (REACH / UNOSAT) and NGO reports complied with each provider's terms. Source attribution and production dates are cited in references.

Photographs and archival images: Photographs reproduced from third parties are used under the rights indicated in their source metadata. Where necessary, written permission from the copyright holder was obtained.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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