Original Paper

Culturally Sensitive Urban Design: The Social Construction of "Homs Dream," Syria

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Abstract

With the proliferation of context-less designs internationally stemming from beliefs around progress, development, growth, and the idea that urban design approaches easily travel and can be replicated, this paper argues that urban design might usefully attend more carefully to the local contexts in which it is practicing. Augmenting traditional proscriptive (critiquing poor practice design) and prescriptive (suggesting best practice design) approaches with new critical thinking on culture, to deliver contextually responsive design that is also culturally sensitive. We argue more must be done to analyse and explore contexts where consensual norms around planning practice are frequently absent, such as places characterised by historically embedded cultural sensitivities; emerging out of conflict; or urban informality. This case is evidenced in an exploration of the discursive construction of 'Homs Dream,' a development scenario for the future of the Syrian city. The paper concludes with a challenge for urban design, in both theory and practice, to continue developing new thinking at the (dis)junction between urban form and culture.

Keywords

urban design, context, culture, discourse analysis, Syria

1. Introduction

Seeking to provide a more considered contextually responsive approach to designing places was one of the primary reasons urban design evolved from the Harvard Conference in 1954 (Krieger & Saunders, 2009). In subsequent years the importance of community participation in the design process has been well established (Jencks, 1977) and widely promoted as a positive action (Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987). This has assisted in developing places that seek to reflect local identity and sense of place, by defining local contexts that can inform design decisions and visions. Today urban design can be defined as "*the process of providing quality contextual places for people*" (Black & Sonbli, 2019a, p. 21). However, if places are to accomplish the aim of considering and honestly reflecting true context, then there is a need

to explore and understand communities in a deeper way, considering culture. Culture is a complex term, one difficult to define effectively (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952), but for the purposes of this paper we will consider culture to be an expression of certain meanings and values by individuals and communities, a process as well as a product, a way of life (Wansborough & Mageean, 2000). Urban design requires new ways of thinking about, and engaging with, culture to allow for a more complex and richer defining of "context," and to ensure contextually responsive design is also culturally sensitive design. This is particularly relevant when urban design operates in areas regarded as being outside of the urban "norm," such as places divided by, or sensitive to, a unique history and/or culture, post-conflict scenarios, or contexts where informal development predominates. It is within these contemporary urban conditions that the urban design process requires recalibrating (Boano & Astolfo, 2016).

This paper calls for urban design to begin to develop a more critical approach to investigating contextual considerations. Presenting the potential of a post-structural perspective, approaching urban design as a cultural product, adding another layer to an already developed focus on physical contexts; regulations; and formal procedures, and putting a spotlight on community as more than consensual participants. Conducting discourse analysis as an approach to urban studies is by no means new; however, its adoption within urban design is underdeveloped and underexplored. Most studies considering the effects of broad discourses (e.g., Hajer, 1993), or the more strongly changing contexts on issues such as planning (e.g., Nadin & Stead, 2008) have been mainly concerned with wide and explicitly declared policy discourses that frequently address global issues such as globalization, pollution, modernization, or climate change, rather than with powerful, fine-grained, social and cultural discourses, which are often marginalised and which affect peoples' day to day practice and meaningful construction. The dominance of what has recently been called "the post-political condition" (e.g., Swyngedouw, 2009) has exacerbated this issue. In this condition, collective consensus is sought, as a mechanism to facilitate rational governance, and strong discourses prevail as a taken-for-granted good. They are beyond disagreement, driven by neo-liberal ideology (Johnstone, 2014). How these taken-for-granted discourses might veil and contradict more local concerns is under-researched. It is in these culturally sensitive arenas that this paper proposes discourse analysis can be of service to the field of urban design by helping to rethink context, and in turn contextually responsive design approaches. The paper provides an overview of discourse analysis as a methodology to deconstruct context and to feed into the analysis of more locally informed cultural dimensions. An empirical case study from Syria is utilised to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering insights into, and considering the wider implications of, a culturally sensitive approach to urban design. The case study focuses on the City of Homs (pre-conflict), a city in part defined by historic cultural sensitivities, and a city now (post-conflict) in even greater need of a culturally sensitive urban design agenda.

2. Urban Design's Crisis of Identity

Traditionally urban design theory tends to be classified as prescriptive, suggesting best practice design (e.g., Rowe & Koetter, 1978), or proscriptive, critiquing poor practice design (e.g., Jacobs, 1962). As such it tends to neglect approaches grounded in critical theory that evaluate beyond the physical form of cities. The field has previously looked to develop new ways of learning from wider theorisations of space and place (Boano et al., 2014), informed by Foucauldian or Agambenian approaches that move beyond the physical to consider issues of power, knowledge, and contested forms of urbanism. Yet these new ways of thinking have arguably yet to truly impact urban design practice and process in a meaningful manner, with regards to understanding the role and impact of culture for better understanding of local contexts. A consequence of a culture-less approach sees many places suffer from context-less designs and visions, which are often based on the notion that design and planning ideas can travel and be replicated (see Ward, 2002).

Urban design's multiple "*spheres of action*" (Krieger, 2009), whilst allowing the field to consider multi-disciplinary concerns, have actually left it vulnerable to the effects of contemporary discourses such as the globalisation (Madanipour, 2006), urban branding (Klingmann, 2007), and notions of the generic city (Koolhass, 1995). The consequence has been to often place less emphasis on the need to produce design that is culturally sensitive. Conflict arises between makers, regulators, and users of the city, in terms of who, or what, it is representing and how this might be related to competing claims to the field of urban design. In the face of such tensions local context and culture is often (mis)understood as something that can be explored through physical urban analysis, often conflating the vernacular as somehow constituting the cultural (Scott Brown, 2009). Misrepresentation of, or disregard for, culture in design can have significant negative impacts on local communities that are most vulnerable (Watson, 2009). Many urban design theorists and practitioners have attempted to identify the complexity of these relationships between culture, context, and community, criticising those who try to oversimplify urban design approaches to understanding how cities work and what constitutes quality (e.g., Alexander, 1966). These studies highlight the wide scope urban design can, and indeed must, take if it is to be successful in designing places that truly reflect local identity, and many projects do manage to engage with culture in a meaningful way (Fromm & Bosselmann, 1985).

3. Lacking in Cultural Sensitivity

Urban design's lack of cultural sensitivity, in both practice and theory, can be most clearly evidenced when considering design interventions in places considered as "extreme." In the case of informality, for example, 90% of design education focuses exclusively on the formal city (Haas, 2012), yet 50% of future urban growth is claimed as being informal in nature (Werthmann, 2012). The context of the Global South is rarely considered in urban design, yet informality is growing beyond an exclusively global southern phenomenon. This lack of knowledge and experience can lead to informality being homogenised and viewed as "other", not conforming to a recognised template of urbanism (Roy, 2011). The challenges of

informality and the need for intervention to secure better conditions and quality of life have been well documented (UN, 2003), but if urban design is recalibrated it can equally learn lessons from informality and intervene in a more sensitive and appropriate manner (Black & Sonbli, 2019a).

Similar experiences can be evidenced in places with embedded cultural sensitivities (Neill, 2011). In such circumstances exogenous interests can be elevated above the "common good" of affected communities and individuals, who are not involved in a meaningful way in the decision-making process of design (de Andrés et al., 2015). Culture can indeed act as social glue in peacetime, yet divide in times of conflict or heightened tensions. Cultural sensitivity therefore becomes critical for urban design in presenting contextual interventions. Understanding of this unknown is often tackled through technocratic modernist approaches, with attitudes and approaches stemming from enlightenment beliefs around progress, development, and growth (Boano et al., 2014). Indeed Watson (2009) argues many of the Global South's formally planned cities swept away the poor in society due to design ideas being largely shaped by global north norms, with these imposed, or borrowed, ideas being ill-situated to their new context. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the Global South, with many "planned" Global North cities guilty of similar exclusion in design (see Koolhaas, 1995). The Homs case study presented in this paper seeks to clarify some of this complexity through an exploration of cultural discourses in a culturally sensitive place before conflict left the city in need of reconstruction, and subsequently elevated the role of urban design, as part of a wider multi-faceted approach, in re-building.

When there is little focus on wider contexts or theories designed to provide sensitive cultural insights, urban design projects can become an exercise in which final form dominates process, and in which market-driven approaches class society as consensual players. Allowing designs to follow fashions or "best practice" within new discourses of "new urbanism," "smart cities," and "eco-cities" without proper cultural consideration of the local place can deliver development that is exclusionary (Watson, 2013) and fails to recognise spaces not as homogenous, but rather as in a state of constant evolution (Boano et al., 2014). In essence urban design must find better ways to explore the uniqueness of place(s) and space(s). There have been calls for new strategies to more realistically accommodate community development (Garstka, 2010) and determine the "common good" in a real political context where the balance of power between the State and its citizens is often unequal (Jenkins et al., 2007). This is further complicated by the tensions arising from actors' individual interpretations of planning policies (Black & Sonbli, 2019b) or ambiguous concepts (e.g., sustainable development). Here urban design requires new drivers of knowledge production, rethinking how to understand the city, and cultural context, in a deeper and more meaningful way, and the impacts this may have for the design process.

Planning has wrestled with similar issues. The cultural turn of the 1970's had introduced the debate that social life is constructed through ideas that people have about it, and the practices that follow from those ideas (Jacobs & Spillman, 2005). The cultural effects on planning have been the focus of many critical perspectives, and urban design could benefit from engaging with these. There is growing understanding in planning that it is strongly rooted in social, political, and cultural contexts of places and in a combined

and evolving relationship between place making, governance, and society (Nadin & Stead, 2008). However, little success has been achieved in developing a culturally oriented perspective (Reimer & Blotevogel, 2012), or in showing how these ideas might work in the contexts of urban designs.

There are currently calls for a more contextual urbanism that considers cultures (Watson, 2009, 2013), yet whilst a growing literature explores the impact of context-less places, little empirical work on such trends has been conducted. A focus on the complex co-evolving relationship between place making and culture can begin to move urban design beyond the proscriptive and prescriptive, to start considering how cultural perspectives from communities might be unlocked (Frediani, 2007). Of course, a cultural approach needs a methodology that will empower researchers to investigate the role and practices of social construction; we argue that discourse analysis can potentially offer precisely this critical lens.

4. Discourse Analysis

Discourse is some knowledge about the world, which shapes how the world is understood, it plays a big role in shaping social reality, and thus social interactions should be analysed by understanding the discourses that produced them (Rose, 2012). This has its own rules, language, acts, ways of reasoning and institutions. Discourse analysis focuses attention on the processes maintaining and constructing social worlds. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) emphasize that if we are to understand discourses and their effects, we must understand the *context* in which they arise. Texts, discourse and the historical context must be connected if researchers are to understand social phenomena. Foucault (1972) argues that since we can only have knowledge of things if they have a meaning, then it is discourse, not the things or the subjects themselves, which produces knowledge. He argues that things mean something and are true only within specific historical contexts.

Discourse is also strongly connected with its physical effects. No ontological distinction can be made between cultural and material practices. Wetherell (2001) acknowledges that one of the most exciting developments in discourse studies has been this emerging focus on what has been called the practical or material efficacy of discourse. She adds that researchers interested in meaning making should study how discourse shapes landscape. So discourse analysis seeks to understand how the social ideas and acts came into being in the first place, and how they became taken-for-granted and maintained over time (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). It focuses on understanding how language constructs social realities.

Discourse analysis can be divided into four categories based on the research interests (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Researchers might be interested in analysing a specific text; or a wider context; deploying critical discourse analysis; or a constructivist approach. It is the context-constructivist approach (which they call social linguistic analysis) and the critical discourse analysis approach that are most relevant to this paper's scope. Constructivist approaches are concerned with the mechanism by which discourse ensures that certain phenomena are made and become taken-for-granted to structure social worlds. They focus on understanding how the cultural nature of relationships within societies comes into being and identify the process of construction that holds them in place. Critical discourse analysis seeks to

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uncover dominance and the privileges of discourses and reveals consequent effects. It focuses on the role of discursive activities in constituting and maintaining unequal power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). The Constructivist approach to discourse analysis is not concerned with exploring the dynamics of politics and power. Rather than exploring how actors benefit or are disadvantaged by the socially constructed reality, its concern is more with the mechanism through which discourse ensures that certain phenomena are constructed and taken for granted to structure this social reality. While critical analysis helps in exploring the social and political nature of relationships within societies, a constructivist approach gives an understanding of *how* these relationships came into being and identifies the process of construction that held them in place.

This framework starts from the question of how a concept, policy, design or assumption came about in a specific culture, and why it has particular meanings at the moment of the research, then focusing on how discourses empowered and weakened actors based on those assumptions. We could explore, for example, how the discourse about a design project draws from and influences democracy, history, religion and identity from the perspectives of the various actors engaged in designing or reading the scheme. We could explore how the concept of informal settlements, for example, is constructed through a diversity of texts, ranging from simple local cultural traditions, to local planning regulations, passing through daily newspaper articles and advertisements, up the political hierarchy to encompass presidential decrees and statements. We might study how external discourses, unrelated to planning or design, give meanings to design-related activities such as respecting planning regulations, facilitating trust in the authority approving the design, or the community's rejection of certain design interventions.

Focus groups, semi-structured interviews, ethnography, historical review and analysis of media materials can all contribute to discourse analysis and facilitate understanding how a discourse is structured and enacted in a specific practice. To illustrate the potential of the technique, our argument now turns to an empirical case study from Homs, Syria.

5. Case Study: Homs Dream, Syria

The selected case study is in Homs City, Syria; a city with historically embedded cultural sensitivities related to sects, religion, politics, and land ownership, and how these have shaped the city's identity. The case study explores a development project announced before the Syrian conflict, that began in 2011, and we argue that using discourse analysis to understand it may represent valuable data that informs any reconstruction plans in the city post-conflict. Homs is the third largest city in western Syria, it was conquered by the Muslims in the 7th century and the subsequent Islamic era naturally shaped Homs' current urban structure, including the organic grid, the old souk, the Ottoman central mosque and the black stone Islamic architecture. All of these features represented valuable cultural symbols to the resident Sunni population. The present demography of Homs reflects Syria's broad religious diversity. Originally, it was made up primarily of Sunni Muslims, with minorities of Alawites and Eastern Orthodox Christians. According to the Sunni population discourse, however, the city

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demography has been changing since the 1970s when President Hafez Assad came to power, since when Alawites and other minorities have been immigrating to the city from surrounding suburbs. The demography and land ownership for the majority Sunni population have represented highly sensitive issues in the city since 1970s when they formally lost power in Syria to Al Ba'ath secular party. Those sensitive issues have rarely been studied in the country due to the sensitive political environment, and the effects of those issues on urban design and the reconstruction plans of the city have never been more critical. The case study aims to shed light on the main relevant discourses that shaped Homs' modern urban context and escalated the tension in the city pre-conflict. It will finally use the analysis as an input to inform thinking about the potential future reconstruction plans in the city post-conflict.

In 2007, only few years before the Syrian war, a highly controversial and very significant urban design project called "Homs Dream" was publicly announced in the City of Homs, in Syria (Homs City Council 2007). The project was described by Homs previous Governor as a "beautiful dream that would achieve the aspirations, needs and dreams of all Homs people" (Zamanalwasl, 2007). A modern city centre, emulating the built form of Dubai was proposed and included new high-rise development and wide streets. Environmental and economic goals were central in this large scale and potentially appealing plan. The project would be replacing a considerable area of the old, modest and low-rise buildings of the city centre (Figure 1). Homs Dream was a city-wide policy that consisted of various strategies and proposed design schemes aiming to improve the city physical character. Its core project was the 20 hectares City Centre regeneration scheme. While Homs Dream is actually wider than this, the locals refer to the city centre project as Homs Dream. The Qatari developer Diar was the major investor in the project which was designed by multiple local architects.

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Figure 1. Homs Dream City Centre Project

Source: Original image sourced from Homs City Council and modified by authors.

The taken-for-granted dream, however, was a nightmare for many people in Homs. A considerable portion of the population saw it as destructive and attacked it. Objection was unusual in Syria and thus the issue was almost unprecedented. Planners and decision makers disregarded this widespread opposition and the government instead assured residents that the right of ownership would be preserved and that no land expropriation would be enforced. Interestingly, some reports made the link between the urban project and the uprising in Homs City (e.g., Al Quds Al Arabi, 2014), as it added to the tensions between residents and the Syrian authorities. Figure 2 shows the key events that happened in Syria in relation to the case study.

Year	EVENT
2000	President Bashar Assad gains power and announced the March toward Development and Modernization in Parliament. The economy started to change from socialism to neo-liberalism.
2007	Homs Governorate announced Homs Dream project as a "material implementation of the march toward development and modernization"
2007	Locals demonstrated against Homs Dream, fearing their lands would be expropriated, and the city's identity would be changed.
2011	Upraising started in Homs city (the Syrian conflict). Homs Dream frozen.
2015	5 Workshops, employing discourse analysis, held in the UK due to conflict in Homs. 34 Homs residents took part (25 Male; 9 Female).
2017	The Syrian government regained total control of Homs
Present	Homs Dream back on agenda part of the reconstruction plans for Homs

Figure 2. The key events that happened in Syria in relation to the case study.

Case research started by exploring the designers' rationale by looking at how Homs City Council tried to sell and justify the project. We explored the formal media reports, the design document and the Governor's statements and comments regarding the project. To understand the cultural context that underpinned local reactions, five workshops with Syrian participants were conducted in the UK. These were conducted in the UK due to the war situation in Syria and the researchers being based in the UK with access to a large network of recent Syrian immigrants from the City of Homs. A pilot focus group was arranged to explore the initial dimensions of the discussion and this framed the subsequent workshop format. Within the workshops wider cultural issues were raised, well beyond the project itself. Participants' assumptions regarding planning, identity, policies, politics, regulations, authority and the project itself were questioned. These questions sought the participants' opinions regarding Homs Dream and the wider issues that impacted their understanding of the scheme. The aim was to understand participants' readings of spatial policies and the urban design approach being promoted by the Local Authority in Homs, and the relationships between these readings. Discussion evolved to consider cultural aspects including demographics, identity, politics, the planning system and historical events. In order to understand participants' positions, the data from the workshops were transcribed and coded.

Archival data and media reports were then collected, and their cultural context explored in the light of the various codes that the participants raised (e.g., the common urban structure of Homs Old City, the planning system, the political context relating to Homs Dream, public participation in the design process, and the delivery of the project) It was important to put the codes in their wider historical context. Finally, the codes were organized into initial categories that represented various themes, which

informed the main discourses that participants used to justify their readings of the Homs Dream project. Finding the relationships between these categories and the design project was a central aim of the case research.

Participants were asked to rank their evaluation of each policy during the discussion. At the end of the session, participants were asked to connect their choices in a coloured line. Participants from each group are given a specific colour. Figure 3 shows the five topics that were discussed and participants' selections. The first topic at the top of the sheet discussed urban policies in Syria as a general issue. It allows impressions of Homs Dream to be related to wider issues of trust in the government's urban plans. Interestingly, while participants lacked planning knowledge, they appeared to take trust-less-ness towards planning policies in Syria for granted. The second row discussed a plan dealing with the regional disparities in the country; the third section discussed a regional plan around Homs proposing future developments outside the city. Participants were less engaged and relatively less critical of these regional plans, as many saw the scale to be beyond their interests. The fourth line discussed the Old City in Homs to give the discussion a more historical dimension. Participants showed a clear interest in discussing the condition of the Old City and the relevant planning policies that affected it. Finally, the discussion focused on Homs Dream city centre project. The urban scale of the last two lines was associated with highly engaged and critical comments from participants.
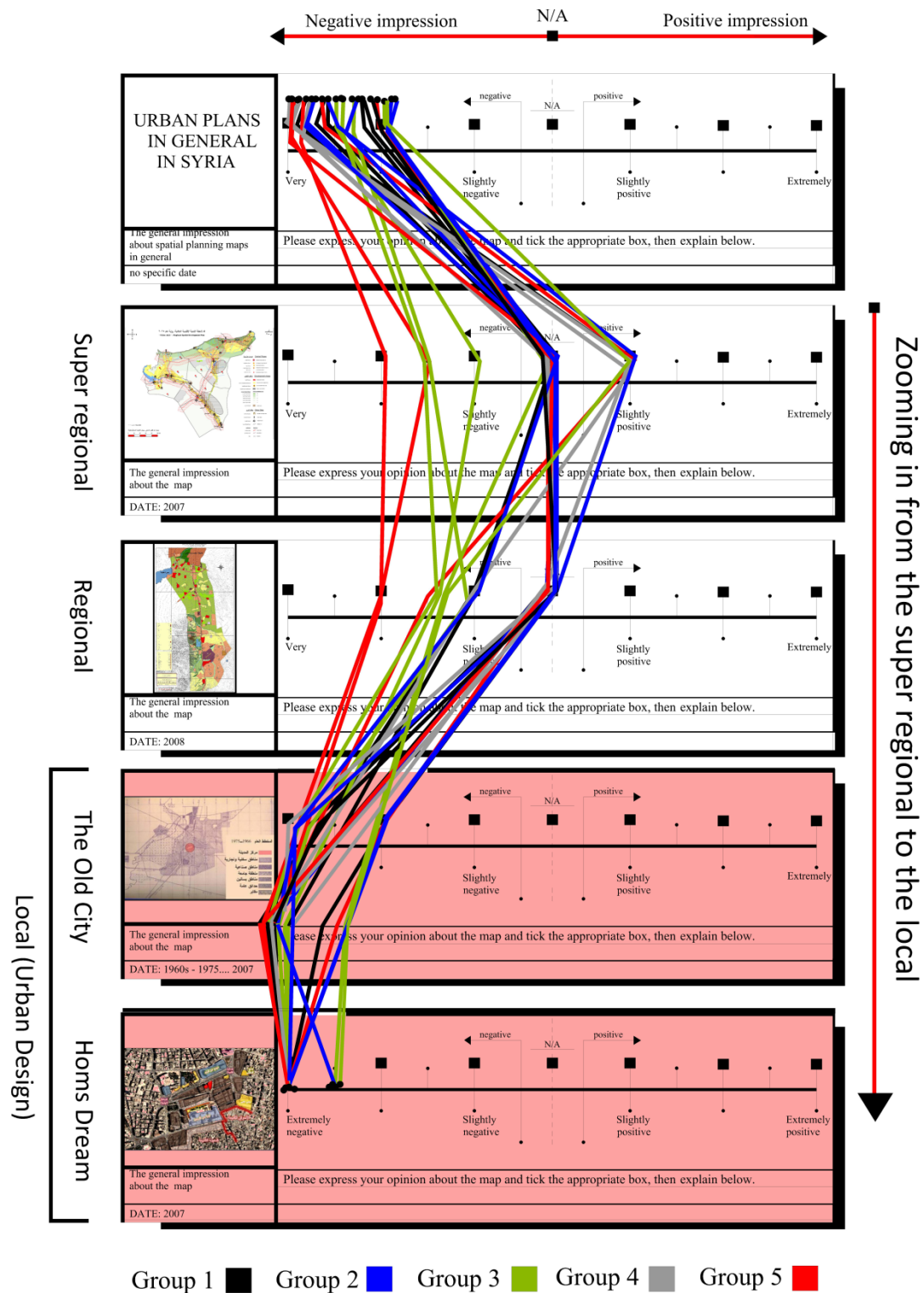
Figure 3. A conceptual diagram illustrating participants' impressions on Homs Dream, Syria—*considering the range of policies from national, regional, and local that directly impacted this project. Each line represents a participant, and each colour represents a group.*

Two disctint discourses were highlighted as relevant to the meanings that came to be attached to the Homs Dream project. The first concerns "development and modernization"; the second is the discourse of "urban design as a weapon". These first two discourses appear to operate under a historically embedded sense of trust-less-ness between the planning authority and the local people in Homs. Below, we discuss the key issues that impacted on peoples' understanding of the Homs Dream project through these identified discourses. It is the combination of these two discourses that socially constructs the Homs Dream case study.

6. Discourse 1: Development and Modernization

> "Development and modernization for whom exactly? I could only see high and expensive
> buildings, while we are becoming poorer!" (Participant B4)

After taking the Oath in 2000, President Assad announced in Parliament a policy that came to be known as *The March Towards Development and Modernization*. This plan emphasised the need for a change of the country's socialist, conservative image—The Homs Dream project was a direct result of this policy shift. The President identified tools which might deliver the plan, including democracy, transparency, constructive criticism, communicating between the leaders and the people and finally the human being (President Assad, 2000). The country witnessed a policy shift towards an opening-up of the economy to encourage foreign investment. A neo-liberal economic orthodoxy was to replace the former socialist orientation. While the public sector had controlled the Syrian market during President Hafez Assad's era, the private sector flourished during Bashar's rule. Liberalizing the economy was a key to attracting investments. Syria successfully transformed from an exporter of investments in 2000, to a main importer until 2011 when the uprising started. Politicians used ideas central to *the March Towards Modernization and Development*, as a framework guiding change. Urban design played a big role in materialising this framework through major new neighbourhood proposals, such as the case study focus "Homs Dream". Homs Dream took a generic approach focusing on physical form, visual appearance and branding was utilised as a rapid mechanism for change. Tall and modern towers invaded the modest urban structure, huge holding companies were instituted, upper-class private schools, where foreign teachers worked were permitted, large Western restaurants, globally well-known brands, boutiques and foreign banks formed the vision behind this new neighbourhood. Homs Dream was reflective of a wider national shift in urban regeneration thinking, which was taken-for-granted, rendered the approach immune from criticism and inevitably came to be perceived as challenging anti-development thought. The Homs Dream project was the Local Authorities way to modernise the city, however such modernisation was not perceived positively across the full population.

A very different set of ideas emerged from the gap between social classes, which had been dramatically widened since 2000. Official policies had been used to marginalize the vast majority of the population and a new group of businessmen emerged to control the economy. The main reason behind that, according to Barout (2011), was the sequence and priorities attached to different aspects of change. The

market was liberalized before starting any radical institutional reform. Liberalization could achieve growth, but failed in achieving a balanced spatial development at the regional level between central and peripheral places, and between the relatively developed western regions and the deprived eastern areas. President Assad's tools were simply reduced by the institutional practices to economic growth and modern image in Homs Dream.

Business interests in the case study project claimed to be following the National Plan policy by exploiting an appropriate investment environment in the region and attracting foreign investments quickly. However, the counter-discourse draws on the assumption that businessmen were concerned with improving sectors such as services and properties where profit is easy to extract. They had significant power over the government and granted investments in the shape of build-operate-transfer contracts for quick profit. Industrial sectors and other public sector institutions "were left to face their inevitable fate" (Barout, 2011). These types of investments in Homs contributed to a dramatic increase in local land prices and affected lives of ordinary residents. Wider development also consumed farmland and privately owned land holdings. An example of profit-oriented policies is the Towers Law, which was applied in Homs City between 2005 and 2007. The law allowed owners to build with few spatial restrictions and destroyed the urban space of the city, failing to help deal with the wider critical housing problems. Land and apartment prices, and rents were dramatically raised, and the towers spread, constructed to minimal urban design standards. It was within the context of such development that the backlash to Homs Dream was formed. An out-dated expropriation law (reformed by the President in 2012) allowed authorities to compulsory purchase lands with almost no restrictions, at a fraction of real market prices—leaving those effected with little legal standing to fight against Homs Dream. Over time a wider issue of trust emerged between the community and the planning authority, and this trust-less-ness can be evidenced in local peoples understanding of planning and urban design as weapons for demographic change.

7. Discourse 2: Urban Design as a Weapon for Demographic Change

Recent research has begun to analyse how urban design in Syria is potentially operating as a weapon. For example, Clerc (2014) discussed the use of planning legislation as a weapon in Damascus after 2011, and how legislation changed according to the political context. Similarly, France24 TV (2012) issued a report regarding the suspicious urban planning/design policies in Syria. Damascus City Council started demolishing large areas of unauthorized residential buildings in 2012 (including six-storey buildings) in spite of the war and the urgent need for housing. The Council justified its action by applying the law of the previous year regarding demolishing unauthorized buildings in southern Damascus. The area happened to be the core of the uprising in the city. According to France24, the inhabitants of the Sunni neighbourhood found the justification for these plans unacceptable. In the words of a citizen from the Zahira area:

> "The authorities would have us believe this is urban planning when we are in the middle of a war. Of all the components of Law 66, only the strategy of demolishing buildings has been implemented. Nothing has been done to relocate the families, or even warn them about the impending demolition of their buildings [...] I am convinced that this operation is just thinly-disguised collective punishment, to which the government is trying to add a veneer of legality." (France 24 TV, 2012)

After the uprising in 2011, these ideas of urban design as a weapon grew in cultural significance. Syrian TV soap operas (e.g., Samaalfan, 2013) broadcast in 2013 featured stories about planning corruption and the unjust use of planning policies in Syria. Whether the drama reflected actual events is irrelevant, what is important is that the discourse has begun to pervade fields beyond official power, reinforcing ideas of planning/design as a weapon.

Sectarian tensions in Homs City encouraged changing emphases in relation to urban design as a weapon. Citizens questioned the lack of law enforcement in pro-government neighbourhoods. According to this discourse, it was highly suspicious to use the demolition law, when the need of housing had never been greater. Historically, planning policies in many Syrian cities have failed to create a mixed, harmonic urban structure inhabited by different sects. Homs City consists of separate neighbourhoods characterized by their sects. While this might be considered natural in other contexts, religious segregation escalated tensions in Homs. Building a new neighbourhood, Homs Dream, and opening it to foreign residents, for example, was received by many locals as adding a foreign component to the original urban and demographic structure. The deteriorated condition of Homs Old City and the proposed Homs Dream masterplan that sought to demolish parts of the historic urban core and replace it with a design lacking in local context and vernacular was perceived as an attempt to replace both the cities, and the residents, identity and traditional character. So many within the workshops argued urban design was being weaponized in the Homs Dream project by the authorities and powerful minorities to allow systematic demographic change to take place within this area.

8. The Social Construction of Homs Dream

> "I am not against change and modernization…but not the City Centre; they could build a new town centre somewhere else" (Participant A2)

As discourse analysis does not seek truth per se, the aim of such a study is to explore discourses and how they came into being, and to make planners, designers and politicians aware of the nature of conflicts and tensions. Deconstructing local contexts clarifies the complex case of Homs Dream in relation to different sets of ideas. Tensions can be explained as a discursive struggle reflecting complex historical events, social constructions and assumptions. Homs was originally made up, primarily, of a Sunni population, with smaller population of Christians and Alawite. The demography in Homs, however, had been changing since independence due to a number of political and social reasons. A mass immigration from rural areas with a different demography to Homs city was one of these reasons; it had created many

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urban and social problems in Homs and its countryside. Planning policies had failed to stop immigration or deal with these problems, and probably worsened them. This, probably natural population movement, was perceived by many locals as politically designed and deliberately planned. Homs Dream, with its tall buildings, high density, and profitable goals was seen by locals as a tool for demographic change. They viewed the whole idea of development and modernization as serving elite interests only. The design, for them, would have changed ownership of city centre land holdings. Outsiders would come to occupy the towers instead of local people, and they would be from different social classes and from different religious communities. The Sunni population believed that they would become a minority in their own city and wanted to claim back *their* place. Local peoples' previous experience with regulations, expropriation and urban design, together with other historical events has affected their interpretation of urban and even regional policies. A sense of trust-less-ness emerged, and the gap widened between decision makers and locals. Urban design revealed this tension, whilst playing a crucial role in building it. Planning and urban design were perceived as a tool for oppression and the authority's dream was instead perceived as a nightmare by those who would have to live with the daily realities of it. The site location was a red line for the Sunni people as it represented the city's core and their history, whilst building height and density also took on cultural meanings in this context. Urban designers and planners should have paid more careful attention to these design elements, in addition to the process of communicating and delivering the project. A national scale initiative to re-build the trust and ease the tension was essential. Exploring only formal planning documents and regulations and conducting a physical analysis to the actual proposal would have failed to contextualise this case.

Syria's future reconstruction plans are critical here. However, the political and social situation in the country remains vague, and therefore arriving at suitable solutions is extremely challenging. Are these sensitive sectorial issues going to be officially recognised and tackled? Will there be any genuine efforts made to unify the remaining fragmented society? Is the government going to be more culturally and socially aware regarding its current and future urban policies? The voice of the residual population is currently weak, urban design could potentially play an active advocacy role in easing tensions between government and wider society. The integration of sects may prove extremely difficult after the civil war and any governmental attempts to unite this fragmented society post-conflict will require an urban design approach that both recognises and understands the cultural sensitivities abounding. If a post-political condition is created, in an attempt to reduce tensions and reach consensus, then culture-less generic designs might be used to replace the current urban structure. They are currently being communicated as modern solutions aiming to change the country's current image. Indeed, the government's visions and approved designs to reconstruct the country reflect this. The government's approved plan to reconstruct the neighbourhood of Baba Amr in Homs, for example, is based on generic tower blocks, which is totally unrelated to the neighbourhood's historic culture. While this might be understood as simply a part of a design, other discourses might interpret these differently, precisely because of the local context, which would escalate the tension, rather than unifying Syrian society. Urban design is failing to provide

contextually responsive solutions in Homs precisely because it has made no attempt to be culturally sensitive in its approach.

9. A culturally Sensitive Approach: Concluding Remarks

It can be argued that the Syrian case discussed in this paper is an extreme example; it was intentionally selected because of this. The case works through the different dimensions of a discursive and cultural approach, and its "extreme" context highlights the importance of this kind of approach. With many post-conflict reconstruction plans expected to begin in the future (e.g., Syria; Iraq; Yemen), such studies could shed light on how urban design might reflect on local cultural aspects that underpin contested urban contexts. However, we argue that other case studies in less extreme environments might also be studied in this way. Such cultural research, we suggest, would be very useful for interpreting comparative case studies, would draw attention to the mobility of modernist and western-oriented design policy issues, and would also help foster a deeper understanding of the nature of urban tensions. In the context of urban design, terms have frequently been borrowed from their original sources and used loosely in design documents. Comparing Homs to Dubai, and applying Dubai's context in Homs is likely to be problematic because these contexts differ. In Homs Dream design terms such as modernity, high-rise and density were borrowed as taken-for-granted concepts. This all led to an apparently context-less and neutral scheme. Therefore, it is useful to explore what happens when urban design ideas travel and are adopted in different places.

We argue that comparisons of urban design concepts should study the process of pulling a design together and its delivery, but also should focus on the informal practices and social discourse that affect the design process, as well as the level of acceptance of the final products among people who might have to live with a design. In the case of Homs Dream the workshop investigations broadened the applicability of conclusions. So this research argues that analysing urban designs should go much further than the physical framework, because the political and social discourses rising from culture, corruption, power relations and conflicting values play essential roles in shaping how designs operate and are consumed. Whilst urban design has developed a healthy habit of engaging communities in the design process (see AlWear et al., 2017), there is little consideration of these deeper cultural issues. Engaging with a suitable methodology, such as discourse analysis, we argue would be a useful addition to urban designs investigative toolkit.

The relationship between urban design and a society is complex, dynamic and co-evolving. We have tried to explore how urban design might operate as a cultural product and employed discourse analysis as a methodology to approach cultural complexity. Rather than simply exploring formal design concepts, we have suggested researchers might explore the design *meanings* for a specific culture, and *how* these meanings came into being in a particular place and time, taking into account different perspectives. Urban design can evolve to be more than simply a technical product of development; rather it might emerge as a contested channel through which places are designed and developed, and as such might

become contextually responsive, and empowering for all stakeholders. Such an approach would be of great benefit to the people of Homs as they seek to rebuild.

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