Discussion of Random and Informal Settlements in Damascus

KHADOUR Yassar  KAFA Main

Abstract  Toadies cities are accumulating the global population in their territories, occurring formally and informally. The increase of urban informality is the most significant trend shaping the 21st century world. Furthermore, the urban informality “theory” should be considered in urbanization courses and development studies. With the rapid economic market development, changes mapped the major Syrian cities. Damascus is in the midst of a profound transformation of architectural and planning changes. Damascus urbanization is crowded simultaneously with informal settlements. In consequence, a detonation of urban sprawl placing random districts and informal settlements around the city (elmokhalafat & elmanatiq elashwaiya). Damascus urban informality is a way of supplying shelters and houses as a fundamental human need. The study hereby highlights the informal phenomenon and its effects on the city at present through analytical study showing solutions and asking questions, and, finally, deals with informality in an urbanized way with self-help constructs and upgrades to aid the low income and urban poor.

Keywords  Damascus city; random districts; informal settlements; urban informality

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Introduction

Cities excited and amazed people, since their early appearance in history several thousand of years ago. The Arab historian Ibn Jubayr wrote “If Paradise will be on earth, Damascus must be it; if it is in heaven, Damascus can parallel and match it.” Cities have been always the center of the region as well as center of everything; always, there is little choice for anyone with a particle of ambition.

This idea of the city as (center of everything) enhances its population rapidly, through rural-urban migration in their search of employment and better life conditions \(^1\). This accumulation occurred in parallel with a deficiency of formal housing in addition to the nonavailability of housing for low-middle-income \(^2\); otherwise, the low purchasing power of people is a significant reason for increasing the informal and random districts dilemma around big cities in developing countries.

The cities’ rapid population growth exceeded the ability of governments to help provide housing; also, increase in the real-estate prices prevented low-middle-income people from gaining suitable housing or even renting it \(^3\). While such population growth, impacted areas are becoming more numerous, larger, and more visible. Such areas with deteriorated housing, inadequate community services, and poor people have so-called slums, randomly or informally. These areas are described generally as having tenure insecurity\(^2\), poverty-related problems, unsanitary, and

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KHADOUR Yassar, School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, 1037 Luoyu Road, Wuhan 430074, China.
E-mail: felodemi9@hotmail.com
unsafe housing, heavy population densities, and lack of essential community services\cite{4}.

1 Brief review of urban informality

The first round of researching informal housing was accomplished in Latin America in the 1970s, replacing what was known as “culture of poverty” and “marginality” with “informality.” The process of illegal subdivision of agricultural land and the squatter action on public land, as well as the inappropriate planning system and policy, have become the largest source of informal settlements development. Much of the housing in developing countries is built outside the formal housing production systems by the owners themselves \cite{5}. These houses belong to various definitions of squatter, informal, illegal, and unauthorized settlements \cite{6}. Generally, the tremendous expansion of informal subdivisions through the illegal urbanization of agricultural land emerged patterns of informal urban development often take place on private, rather than public land, while squatter actions take place and expand illegally on appropriated land (usually public), whereas housing developed on legally owned or rented land, but without the necessary permissions from the local authorities, is referred to as quasi-legal or unauthorized \cite{7}.

Many informal houses, although visually chaotic, contain serviceable structures that meet the needs of residents at a cost they can afford and in a location that has economic advantages \cite{8}. In addition, they also can combine housing quality with affordability as well as provide lower quality housing or at least the inputs required by residents who build their own low-quality housing. It is regarded as an important character in the progress of the developing countries because of its unique urban fabric, culture, and experiences.

Informal settlements like all human habitats do not just happen; they are designed locally, as mentioned a “choice model of design” in the sense that is purposeful \cite{9}. More significantly, it is not only a new mode of urban existence but a new way of urban life. Additionally, the informal sector became more important with the rise and maturity of a formal sector, and it is subservient to the formal sector \cite{5}.

The urban poor in these informal settlements are not marginal or excluded from society anymore. Rather, they are fully integrated into society but on terms that often cause them to be economically exploited, socially stigmatized, and culturally excluded \cite{10}. Though, this did not stop the poor from aiming for “social transformation” through their everyday struggle for urban services or “collective consumption.” \cite{11} Consequently, the informal activity and informality phenomenon is a survival strategy and a safety valve for societal tensions \cite{12}. Many professional planners were able to see potential benefits in the squatter, informal and spontaneous shelters, as the new migrants were seen as helpful to the urban economy rather than a drain on it \cite{13}.

Many factors contributed and complicated the housing dilemma in developing countries and are expected to continue. The growth of urbanite population (Fig. 1)—urbanite population in Syria reached 50.18 % (2004 census)—is the main factor related directly to the informality problem, and as much as it is expected to grow, informal settlements as well, increasing pressures on political, social, and economic systems \cite{14}.

![Fig. 1 Urbanite population growth in two centuries](image)

The urban populations will concentrate in large cities. These extreme accumulations as expected will occur largely in developing countries and will generate huge demands for housing and public services, such as streets, water and sewer systems, crime prevention, disease control, electricity, transportation, and human services \cite{15}. Moreover, the major question and challenge then is what to equip and how to provide such services.

2 Discussions

As a dynamic structure, the cities have always
changed, stretched, and generate new ideas to meet their inhabitants’ variable needs. Damascus as well, one of the earliest settlements in human history, has experienced all the cities historical periods and evolution. The city has flourished out of its history\cite{16}.

The region has witnessed assorted socio-cultural, economical, and political transformations during last quarter of the 20th century; this phenomenon effects appeared as series of urban problems, such as urban ‘sprawl’, house shortage, informal settlements, and random districts. The unplanned belts dominated and surrounded the majority of Syrian cities; Damascus as the capital is the centre of these transformations. In addition, the result generally has been a grown city in size.

Today’s Damascus is a complex structure, containing numerous models and components of architecture and urban fabric, relating and interacting with each other, assembling more than 4.135 million of Syrian population in its territory, in addition to the economy, finance, administration and politics facilities (Table 1).

Table 1  The ratio of the Great Damascus Region to the whole nation

| Great Damascus Region | Area 10% of total | Population 12% of total | Economy 27% of total |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|

Source: Ministry of Local Administration and Environment MLAE.

With the high rate of developments in the market, economy [Law No.10], and urbanization in Damascus during 1980s and 1990s, the city entered into a transformation era of construction guided by the formal urban planning theories. The spontaneous and informal settlements took a big partition during this era, there was extreme destruction of the original master plan zones as well as degradation of the Ghotha, the green courtyard of the city. Many laws and articles has declared to forbid the informal settlements, but none of them found a way to reality, simply because of one reason, the informality is subservient to the formality economically. The planning policy should regard the informality existing through upgrading, giving more to localities, and maintaining the balance between the formal and informal.

Contemporary Damascus is not only one city. It could be classified legibly and identically as three separated cities while being integrated in borders and districts: the historical city; the modern city, which was built during and under the norms of urban planning theories; and “the rest.” This is the informal settlement, heavily densities, and urban and architectural dysfunction that are made up of urban middle class, urban poor, and rural migrants without technical helps, skills, or infrastructure.

2.1 Informal settlements in Damascus

“Article 44,” dated 1960, was the first law that dealt with the informal settlements (elmokhalafat & elmanatiq elashwaiya), which includes the resolution to demolish all informal buildings, which was defined by the article as Buildings without permission and those contrasting with the approved master plan: buildings located on the public land completely or partly, buildings that deform the whole atheistic scenario of the place, and buildings lacking of safety factors.

Informality now is an expression of the poor’s entrepreneurship. The squatter action on public and exploited land as well the inappropriate planning policy to offer housing in the legal market\cite{3}, plus the process of illegal subdivision of agricultural land as mentioned, are the main sources of informal settlements growth in Damascus. Moreover, in the absence of formal income, informal work became part of a survival strategy. The common characteristics of the informal settlements are insecurity of tenure and low standard of infrastructure and facilities.

In Damascus, the tremendous expansion of buildings illegally emerged patterns of informal settlements (Table 2). This often develops in private and public land, without necessary permissions from the local authorities\cite{22}, and in zones with special land use features and activities as applied in the General Master Plan of Damascus in 1968 and even before that.

The informal settlements contain buildings structured on zones for agriculture; future development areas; industrial, residential, sensitive lands, land lacking with topographical plans, and even on land for future artery transportation. These places are attractive poles for rural migrants, urban poor, and, recently, the urban middle income who found these were fertile places for housing. Consequently, land
prices are increasing, and it is becoming more difficult for the poor to own and build houses even in informal districts.

During the 1990s, Damascus urban informality market witnessed a big growth and development since many contractors and middlemen control this market, and the local municipal administration itself has become a client and part of the informality game. This can explain the continuation of the informal districts’ growth in Damascus although it is prohibited.

Table 2  Major informal districts within the administration area of Damascus

| Informal district name | Area (hectare) | Population 1994 | Population 2020 |
|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Kaboon                | 48            | 14 700          | 35 000          |
| Shawraa               | 38.1          | 10 868          | 11 750          |
| Mastabah              | 13.9          | 4 951           | 6 810           |
| Al mazzeh             | 82.5          | 37 500          | 45 000          |
| Mazzeh khalf Ar-razi  | 41            | 4 738           | 4 100           |
| Kaser al lebad        | 21.75         | 5 500           | 5 268           |
| Barzeh               | 170.6         | 55 407          | 72 136          |
| Hai teshreen          | 55            | 9 087           | 23 000          |
| Aysh al warwar        | 60            | 9 914           | 10 126          |
| Kadam informal        | 142           | 49 617          | 37 635          |
| Hai Blal informal     | 89.25         | 20 545          | 21 690          |
| Tabaleh+ Dwelaa       | 90            | 26 103          | 80 000          |
| Jowbar informal       | 46.7          | 9 340           | 9 340           |
| Kafar susi            | 35            | 4 965           | 6 015           |
| Lu-wan                | 33            | 14 421          | 21 621          |
| Dha deel              | 93            | 40 641          | 30 000          |
| Rizz and Qudsaya      | 115           | 15 826          | 17 320          |

Note: There are many approved Master plans for some parts of the informal settlements, but none of them was setup on ground.

The different types of self-help housing that were produced under the term of urban informality in Damascus are recognized by some analysts as a problem, while others identified it as a housing shortage solution (3rd report of Damascus’s Master Plan Structure 1997, MOH). Recognizing that the urban poor and migrations struggle to house themselves could help solve the housing shortage in developing countries, joined with the understanding that many of these settlements need to improve and upgrade under government observation (local agencies). As in Damascus, 70% of these houses are in good physical condition, 20% need upgrading, and 10% need to be rebuilt.

2.2 Informal settlements factors

The survey study found that the approaches of urban informality in Damascus were attributed by two main groups of factors: Outer factors belong to the political regime in the region, as Damascus attracted Palestinian refugees before in 1948, and later, the Syrian refugee occupied Golan Heights in 1967. Inner factors were related to the following:

- Damascus is a center of the economical, financial, educational, management facilities, and activities.

- Housing shortage (Fig. 2) was due to (1) lack of new policies for housing construction, high prices of estate and property in the formal planned areas, as well the loans and banking system for the benefit of house owner; (2) inappropriate urban planning system and land use policy, and lack of public and private investments in the housing market and housing delivery system; And (3) other complex problems related to the local administration and municipality, such as slow reaction as compared to the rate of the urban/random sprawl. Lack of comprehensive planning thought produced confusion in the urban net on the national level.

- Transportation factors. The growth of cars and microbuses marketing during 1990s eased the transportation facilities and encouraged people to live in the fringe areas and small towns around Damascus in a circle of 35km radius, thus rapidly helping the growth of informal settlements. Later, transportation pollution became a big problem that faced Damascus.'
sector, it was about 102,000 units. This means that 67% of the housing was from the informal sector.

2.3 Informal settlements urban fabric

The informal settlements like all human habitats not accidentally happen but are designed to give the highest compensation from the lowest options, as house changes are made gradually depending on the need and the alternatives available.

The informal urban fabric in Damascus is a patchwork of unplanned buildings, completely done away from urban or architectural methods, as land owners usually divide their lands to small lots with an access to the public road, thus the squatters exploit the public land. In other cases, the owners themselves keep small parts intentionally as a public route and access to his new plot. The informal fabric form could be classified in Damascus as grid and non-grid fabric, depending on the land topography, the grid style clearly seen in eastern (At-Tabaleh) and southern Damascus (Al-kadam), while the non-grid style is located at the northwest (Al mazzeh) in the mountainous areas.

Generally, there is a grid of main (10-12 m) and secondary (8m) roads, forming wide sections of land, divided into plots for houses, using a network of small roads, lanes, and cul-de-sac (4-6 m). These latter forms the residential segment plots with a front of 20-25 m and a variable deep. A notable point that is after the rapid growth of the urban informality in Damascus the landlords again divided their plots and sold this part to build a new house. This raises the build-up average area to reach 95% from the total settlements area.

The case of Damascus informal settlements differs from other informal cases around the world. These houses often are built with concrete blocks and columns, while the roof reflects the position of the owners. The phases and core house ideas are the most popular way of building, and this depends on the owner’s savings as it usually takes a long time to finish the house. During the 1990s, the informal settlements grew up rapidly (Figs. 3, 4, and 5); as new cases of corporation have been created, the owner offers the land, while the contractor offers the money and his relationship with the municipality to build a five or six multifloor house.

2.4 Recommendations

Three groups of recommendation are suggested to in parallel between three axes:

a) The law. Control and prohibit the informal buildings by laws and identifying all settlements by producing a detailed plan.

b) Legalization. Upgrade the existing informal settlements through legalization and secure the property of its inhabitants.
c) Affordable houses. Improve the public/private sectors to provide affordable houses for low-middle-income people.

Another three points should be noticed when developing secondary and satellite cities: (1) strengthen the economies of existing secondary cities; (2) encourage growth and diversification of small towns; (3) and strengthen the economic, social, and political linkages among secondary cities and larger and smaller settlements [21].

3 Conclusion

A fabrication of three city classifications contributed to one big city. In addition, the existing small cities and towns should grow and join together and link to the Damascus area forming big urban territory. Presently, there are 50 detailed informal settlements (Figs. 6 and 7) around the city, equalizing 27.46% of the city jurisdiction area. It contains more than 46.5% of its population. Damascus is becoming a city of Urban Tragedy, as Lewis Mumford once wrote and understood the city as a “theater of social action.” With everything in confusion, the city becomes a battlefield for conflicting cultures, inharmonious ways of life. The Urban Tragedy of the city demolishes the fertile grounds of the surrounding Ghouta; it would not remain any more in 2020 except for some scraps of greenery [18]. Moreover, the city suffers of big urban crises, which is classified as [19]

- Inflation, congestion, and low levels of various facilities and infrastructure services.
- Lack of modern transportation network.
- Environmental impacts of air pollution and water contamination [20].
- Health impacts like mental, aspiration, heart, or blood disease as reason of the daily commuter, crowding and traffic jams. Social problems like segregation by cutting the relationship between the people themselves and their culture and decreasing the people responsibilities to the general public law.
- High rate of power and water waste as the informal settlements usually use illegal ways to supply power and water.
- Loss of a sense of place and its legibility.

The informal settlements should not remain a reality but should upgrade, horizontally, by improving the people’s ability to house themselves and, vertically, by basing on the local government, focusing on the informal settlements future in zooming in/out inspection within its details, mastering and making comprehensive plans consequently.

It is important to understand the dynamics of urban informality, how its mechanism operates, and what kind of housing it provides. As it is important for government agencies to learn from the informal sector and self-help houses how to combine housing quantity with affordability? This can help reach integrated design between the quality (formal) and the quantity (informal).

Finally, two resolutions should be highlighted within the stages of future comprehensive plan and regional plan: first, learn lessons from the experiences of others countries, and second, minimize the differences between the cities and countryside. Moreover, to improve life conditions in the countryside, build new but affordable residential settlements, such set-
tlements preserves the local life and the villages’ characteristics; widen the transportation network; and develop the local industries in the countryside. This plays a big influence in reducing rural-urban migrations.

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