

**ARCHITEKTURA  
KRAJOBRAZU**  
**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**

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**NAWARAH AL BASHA**

PhD student

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4620-4028>**NEBRAS KHADOUR**

PhD student

e-mail: [Nebras.Khadour@hallgato.uni-szie.hu](mailto:Nebras.Khadour@hallgato.uni-szie.hu)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5267-9279>

Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences — MATE

Urban Planning and Garden Art

Institute of Landscape Architecture

e-mail: [Albasha.Nawarah@hallgato.uni-szie.hu](mailto:Albasha.Nawarah@hallgato.uni-szie.hu)

# THE IMPORTANCE OF URBAN REGENERATION THROUGH CULTURAL HERITAGE THE CASE OF BAB TOUMA SQUARE IN DAMASCUS, SYRIA

## ZNACZENIE REWITALIZACJI MIAST POPRZEZ DZIEDZICTWO KULTUROWE PRZYPADEK PLACU BAB TOUMA W DAMASZKU, SYRIA

**ABSTRACT**

Utilizing cultural heritage in the process of urban regeneration of cities is becoming key principle that can guarantee creating sustainable spaces. Its role is accentuated even more nowadays with globalization processes exposing most parts of the world to similar influences. This research discusses the concept of urban regeneration as a comprehensive development approach and highlights the potential role of tangible, intangible and natural components of cultural heritage as leading actors in this approach. By studying the case of Bab Touma square, a historical urban square in Damascus, the research aims to set forth the importance of communicating those cultural elements as a mean to strengthening spatial identity and spatial attachment towards a space. The research adopts an analytical method and tracks the urban development phases of the square in order to define how they contributed to the change of the square's image and identity, considering such urban spaces in the city with so many symbolic, cultural and historical values as generative points that could play a vital role in activating the process of urban regeneration of the city.

**Keywords:** urban regeneration, cultural heritage, natural heritage, local identity, spatial attachment

**STRESZCZENIE**

Wykorzystywanie dziedzictwa kulturowego w procesie rewitalizacji miast staje się kluczową zasadą, która może zagwarantować tworzenie zrównoważonych przestrzeni. Jego rola jest jeszcze bardziej zaakcentowana w dzisiejszych czasach, gdy procesy globalizacyjne narażają większość świata na podobne wpływy. Niniejsze badanie omawia koncepcję rewitalizacji miast jako kompleksowego podejścia rozwojowego i podkreśla potencjalną rolę materialnych, niematerialnych i naturalnych składników dziedzictwa kulturowego jako wiodących elementów tego podejścia. Analizując przypadek placu Bab Touma, historycznego placu miejskiego w Damaszku, badanie ma na celu określenie znaczenia komunikacji tych elementów kulturowych jako środka wzmacniającego tożsamość przestrzenną i przywiązanie do przestrzeni. W badaniu przyjęto metodę analityczną, prześledzono fazy rozwoju urbanistycznego placu w celu określenia, w jaki sposób przyczyniły się one do zmiany wizerunku i tożsamości placu, biorąc pod uwagę miejsca o tak wielu wartościach symbolicznych, kulturowych i historycznych, jak generatywne punkty, które mogłyby odegrać istotną rolę w uruchomieniu procesu rewitalizacji urbanistycznej miasta.

**Słowa kluczowe:** regeneracja miejska, dziedzictwo kulturowe, lokalna odrębność, przywiązanie do przestrzeni

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cities have become unlikely but crucial zones for the survival of humanity. They are currently spaces for the most consequential attempts at human adaptation and sustainability (James, 2015). Nowadays, the need for a new paradigm for urban development of cities is substantial, one that could guarantee sustainable results, especially with all the processes of globalization exposing cities around the world to similar influences, which can lead to the loss of a sense of place in communities as their traditional underpinnings weaken.

Urban regeneration can be considered as a development approach that could respond to the opportunities and challenges that are presented by urban degradation in a particular space at a specific moment (Roperts & Sykes & Granger, 2017). It deals with the complex and dynamic system of cities and urban areas and can solve problems on different levels such as: the lack of identity of a residential area, the total lack of public spaces and the high urban density, which makes it impossible the widening of roads, green areas creation, planting trees along the sidewalks etc. Urban regeneration involves the distressed urban areas revitalization, through actions such as rehabilitation of historic areas; improvement of living conditions in residential districts; redevelopment of public spaces: squares, parks, urban furniture (Alpopi & Manole, 2013). It is a comprehensive approach that builds up interconnected solutions taking all the assets and unique qualities of the city into consideration.

Furthermore, urban regeneration through cultural heritage is being discussed widely nowadays as a key element for urban sustainable development, and many international organizations like UNESCO and ICOMOS (UN, 2016 — Potts, 2016) are drawing attention to the role that cultural heritage can play in urban regeneration and enhancing cities. Cultural heritage is being considered as a priority component of urban plans and strategies and an important asset to be protected from potential disruptive impacts of urban development.

In the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), cultural heritage was recognized in one of the goals of this agenda as a mean to making cities 'inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'. Also, in the New Urban Agenda (UN, 2016), cultural heritage was considered to have a role in humanization of cities and sustainable development.

Cultural heritage can contribute towards well-being and quality of life of communities, can help to mitigate the impacts of cultural globalization and

can become an incentive for sustainable economic development (Gražulevičiūtė, 2006).

Building on that, the research discusses the potentials of applying this concept of urban regeneration through cultural heritage in an urban square in Damascus, known as Bab Touma square. It investigates the importance of utilizing the cultural heritage components of the square as a mean to creating a sustainable square and increasing spatial attachment towards it.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research studies the case of a public square that holds great historic and cultural values. Bab Touma square is located at the northern east edge of the Old City of Damascus, the Capital of Syria, creating one of the seven entrances to the Ancient City (Ill. 1).

The gates of the Ancient City gained throughout the history an important status, not only for their value as artifacts, but also for their vital role as sensitive centers controlling access to the Ancient City. Bab Touma (the Gate of Thomas) that was once a gate within a wall providing an entrance with a narrow route to an ancient city is now a monumental artifact at the center of an urban open space with high complexity of traffic flows.

The research adopts an analytical method to study Bab Touma square, by tracking the urban development phases of the square and all the changes they brought, especially their impact to the local identity and how they affected the use and perception of the square by the residents. The research will highlight the elements of cultural heritage, which the square is exuberant with, and their contribution to the process of place making in each of the urban development phases in order to evaluate the significance of utilizing these elements in regeneration of the square.

The research is based on a wide range of materials such as, historical maps, photo archives, design plans and development plans for Bab Touma Square (Alriz, 2006, DGAM, Damascus Municipality Archive), and a variety of literature related to the study area (Alsheikh, 2001; Alshihabi, 1996, Sabbouh & Almahayni & Fakoush, 1995; Shoura, 1987, and literature related to the theoretical concepts of cultural heritage and urban regeneration (Alpopi & Manole, 2013; James, 2015; Nocca, 2017; Potts, 2016; Roperts & Sykes & Granger, 2017).

## 3. RESULTS

The Ancient City of Damascus dates back to the Aramaic era, in fact, there are documents that indicate its existence even before the Aramaic period back

to the Bronze Age in the middle of the third century BC (Shoura, 1987). However the gates of the city first appeared in the Byzantine era (Alshihabi, 1996; Shoura, 1987), during which the city started expanding outside the borders of its wall and extended mainly to the north of Barada River, and the availability of fresh water and fresh air in that area was the main factor that encouraged this continued expansion towards the northwest. The other direction of expansion was towards the south, which had different reasons of a logistic and religious nature. The Horan area in the south was and still is considered a source of grain for Damascus, and the road leading to Jerusalem and to the Holy City (Makkah) emphasized the importance of expansion towards the south (Shoura, 1987).

The city growth outside the wall gave the gates an important status as controlling points that connected two different urban fabrics, and with time, the developed urban areas around the gates became sensitive centers, and served as commercial, religious and touristic attraction points. The roads connected to these gates are main streets with high traffic connecting the old city with the modern city.

Bab Touma being one of the northern gates and one that is adjacent to the course of Barada River had an active role since the beginning of the city's expansion process. Nowadays, one of the most livable commercial routes connecting the north east of Damascus directly with the Straight Street<sup>1</sup> inside the Old City crosses through Bab Touma square (Ill. 1).

The square underwent significant transformational processes as part of the urban regeneration strategies of the city, which arguably presented a negative impact on the local identity of the space.

In 1961, the Secretariat of the Capital demolished part of the city wall east to the gate opening an access next to the gate and opening the square in front of it.

In 1965, the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums removed the buildings on top of the wall close to the gate and restored it.

In 1975, work was completed to remove the facilities around the gate, which transformed the square to the present appearance (Alsheikh, 2001).

The structure of the gate itself underwent many changes but many details of the arch and steps and the main structure remains the same. One of the most transformative changes was in 1936, when French architect Echoshar<sup>2</sup> restored the gate and demolished

the minaret next to it because of its bad condition, the minaret base and some of the steps remain (Sabbouh & Almahayni & Fakoush, 1995).

With those changes, the state of the gate was also changing to transform from being a 'functional element' attached to the wall to become a freestanding 'monumental element' at the center of the square (Ill. 2).

Furthermore, an issue that is most challenging in this area and is a direct result of the urban development plans is the use of the square. The area transformed with time to become mainly a parking area around a historical monument. The square is heavily dominated by vehicles and does not encourage pedestrian activities.

The square is close to a highway and very well connected to a main roundabout (Ibn Assaker). There are also two other vehicle flows coming from al Kassa'a axis and Adib Ishak street which are part of the public transportation circulation in the city. Another flow enters the square from Alfaryin street to the west, which is a narrow street that runs between a branch of Barada river and the wall of the Ancient City. Due to its limited width, the use of this street is mainly by residents of houses at the bank of the river and the flow is weak and slow (Ill. 3).

The heavy flows of traffic and allowing vehicles to enter and park in the entire area of the square is a major issue. The unsuitable environment for pedestrians is depriving people of all the existing and potential qualities of this space. It not only compromises the presence of a historical monument as a main attraction for people at the center of this area, but also does not allow people to perceive the square as an inviting place to stay in, but rather as merely a crossing point to enter the Ancient City.

Although the aim of the intensive vehicle circulation is to provide an easy access to the Ancient City, however the urban development decisions had resulted in transforming the square into a roundabout and a parking area, instead of creating a place for people.

Furthermore, some experiences in this domain of utilizing cultural heritage elements in urban regeneration have suggested that not only tangible heritage such as architecture or historical artifacts can be seen essential in the process of place making, but also intangible and natural heritage elements are no less effective, especially the ones that speak to the collective memory of the locals and allow people to perceive them as points of reference that can strengthen feelings of attachment to the place (Gražulevičiūtė, 2006; Nocca, 2017).

French redevelopment of Damascus during its occupation of Syria.

<sup>1</sup> The straight street: the Roman Street (Decumanus Maximus) which runs from east to west in the old city of Damascus with a length of 1570 m and width of 26 m. It was mentioned in the New Testament.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Ecochard (1905–1985): a French architect, urban planner and archaeologist. He played a large part in the

Bab Touma square is exuberant with manifestation of the intangible heritage and culture of this ancient community. Many occasions are celebrated in this site around the year, such as the installation of the biggest Christmas tree in the city next to the gate, in addition to the scouts' performances, which usually take the axis of Al-Kassa'a Street to end up at the square. Another instance is the presence of Licorice street sellers in the square, especially during the hot summers, those sellers are part of the city's culture and present an inherited traditional profession that managed to survive until our days. The Licorice seller is a representation of many traditions in one person, with his fully traditional costume made of famous damascene fabrics and prints, the copper ware he uses and the beverage he offers.

Furthermore, Damascus has been known since ancient times for the abundance of its rivers in all seasons and the sweetness of its water. It is situated south of Mount Qasiyun and overlooking the Barada River, which watered a large and fertile oasis 'al Ghutah' before vanishing into the desert, and having this iconic river course as a natural heritage element running by the square is an opportunity that cannot be overlooked during the process of development. Nowadays, the river is not integrated in the design of the square and large parts of its course in this area have a concrete base that caused damage to the biodiversity and the wet habitats of the river.

The old trees in the square can be considered of a cultural value as well. Some of the commonly planted trees in Damascus can be found in this square, like the *Arecacea*, the *Schinus Molle* and the *Eucalyptus Globulus*, which are very well adjusted to the climate of Damascus and bring a reference to the old memory of the city as a fertile oasis.

All the above mentioned elements of cultural heritage that are found in the square present important assets of this space, and utilizing them in the development plans can contribute to the reproduction of the spatial identity of the square.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The research recognizes the character of duality embedded in the organism of the square. It is a transitional space between two different urban fabrics with a relatively limited area that holds great historical and cultural values, but is demanded at the same time to accommodate variety of functions for today's society. The square as an entrance area to the Ancient City is a hectic space that encourages continuous flows of people passing through, but also a space that impels for stillness and invite people to stay for all its artifacts and cultural manifestation.

The main cultural manifestation stands at the center of the square, Bab Touma, one of the gates at the wall of the Ancient City, which played a vital role throughout history in the life of people of Damascus, granting it with a symbolic value that lingers until now and holds a place in the heart of every Damascene.

Furthermore, the memory of Damascus as an oasis in the desert gave Barada River a cultural quality. The oasis provided travelers with sweet water since ancient times and it was later customary for Damascenes to build water elements known as 'As-sabeil', in the markets and at the corners of mosques and old schools as a sign of charity to thirsty passers-by and as a way to provide drinking water for all people at any time. Thus, the course of Barada River in the square presents a strong feature that could contribute with ecological, recreational and cultural benefits.

During the process of creating the square, the wall of the Old City was removed in this area leaving the gate as a freestanding monument. The old narrow route that used to pass through the gate has faded away as well and the gate is no longer a functional element but rather an isolated one standing in the middle of a roundabout. Removing elements with such historical and cultural values can be a necessity to adopt to new demands of the city growth; however, it needs a careful approach that is keen to preserving the memory of the place.

Although the development strategies were established to improve the connectivity to the old walled city and to accommodate the various needs of different categories of users in such a vital area, but one can argue that they have found themselves in conflict with the identity of the city. Isolating the historical gate, ignoring the wall of the Ancient City as an artifact itself and not considering the adjacency of such an iconic feature of the city that is Barada River compromise the historical, natural and cultural values of the square.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Urban spaces in the city with so many symbolic, cultural and historical values, such as Bab Touma square, can be generative points and play a leading role in the process of urban regeneration of the city, and they should be designed in accordance with these values. The features of tangible and intangible heritage in those spaces can act as identity-generating features that could result in more sustainable spaces. Not only the gate and the wall in Bab Touma square are important features, but also the cultural meaning

of Barada River, the vegetation and the use of the square as an entrance to an ancient city. All of which speak to the collective memory of the locals and help developing feelings of attachment to the square.

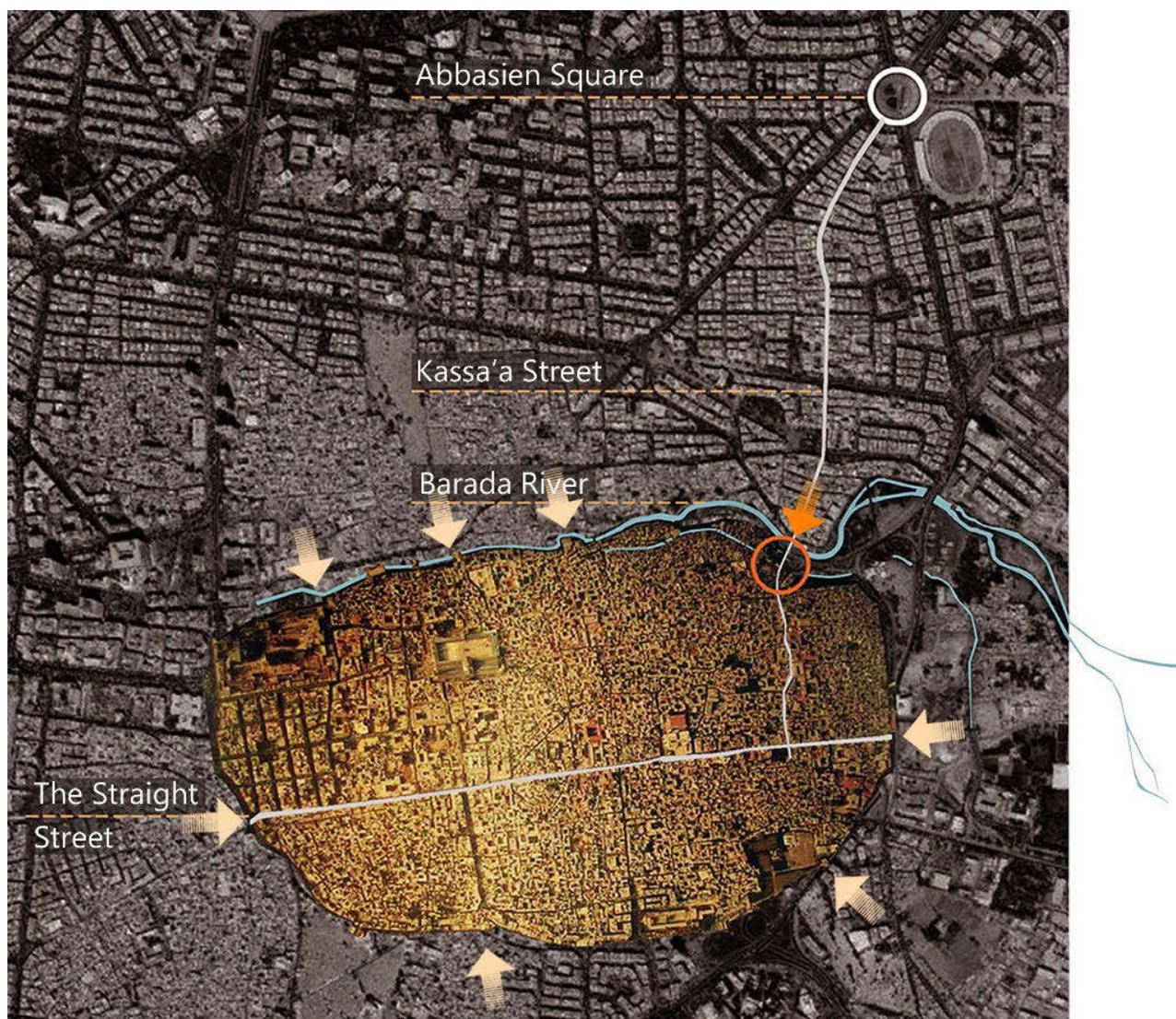
Furthermore, the urban regeneration plans should consider the duality in the process when trying to apply a cultural heritage based approach. The potentials of the space should be handled to balance both preserving the history and aspiring for the future, the new demands of contemporary life and local traditions, and most importantly preserving the memory of the place and developing a strategic spatial identity that could guarantee a sustainable space.

On the other hand, it is important to highlight the role and potentials of natural features as part of the cultural heritage in strengthening spatial identity.

Damascus is known for its three iconic natural features, Mount Qasiyun, Barada River and the fertile oasis Al Ghutah, all of which are of a great value for the locals and creating manifestations of these features within the urban environment of the city can provide points of reference for people and help in strengthening feelings of attachment as well.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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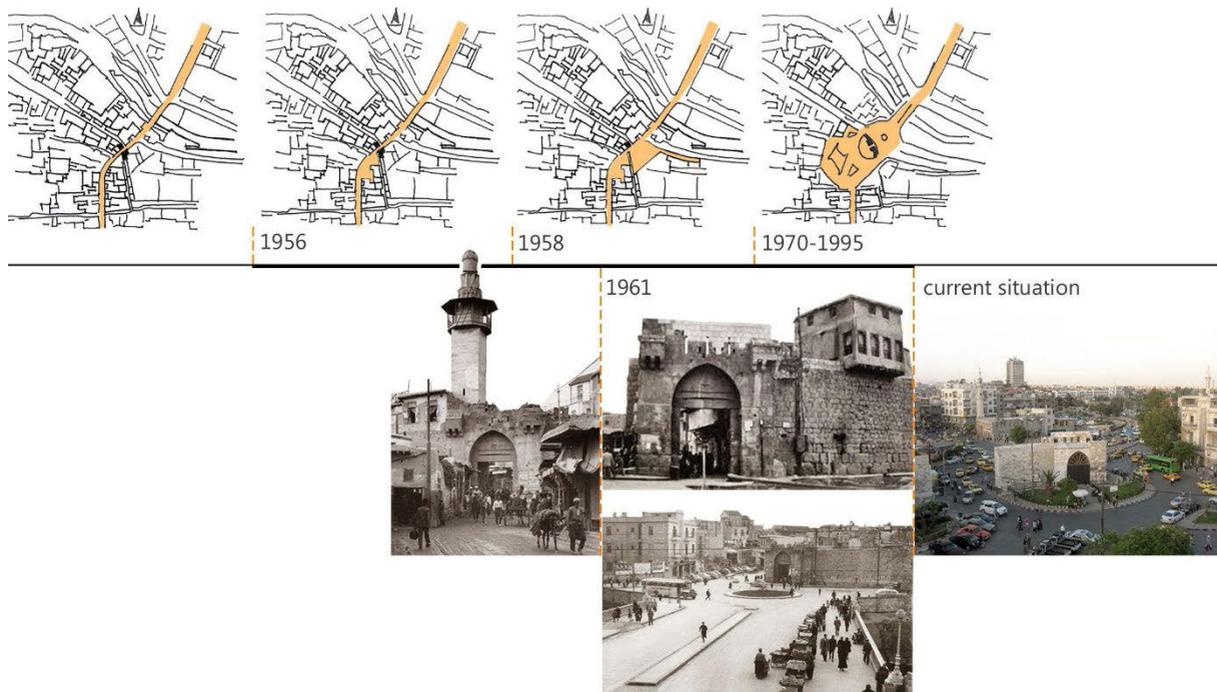


Ill. 1. Location and role of Bab Touma square in the urban context.

Source: by Nawarah Al Basha based on Google Earth.

Il. 1 Lokalizacja i rola placu Bab Touma w kontekście urbanistycznym.

Źródło: opracowanie: Nawarah Al Basha na podstawie Google Earth.

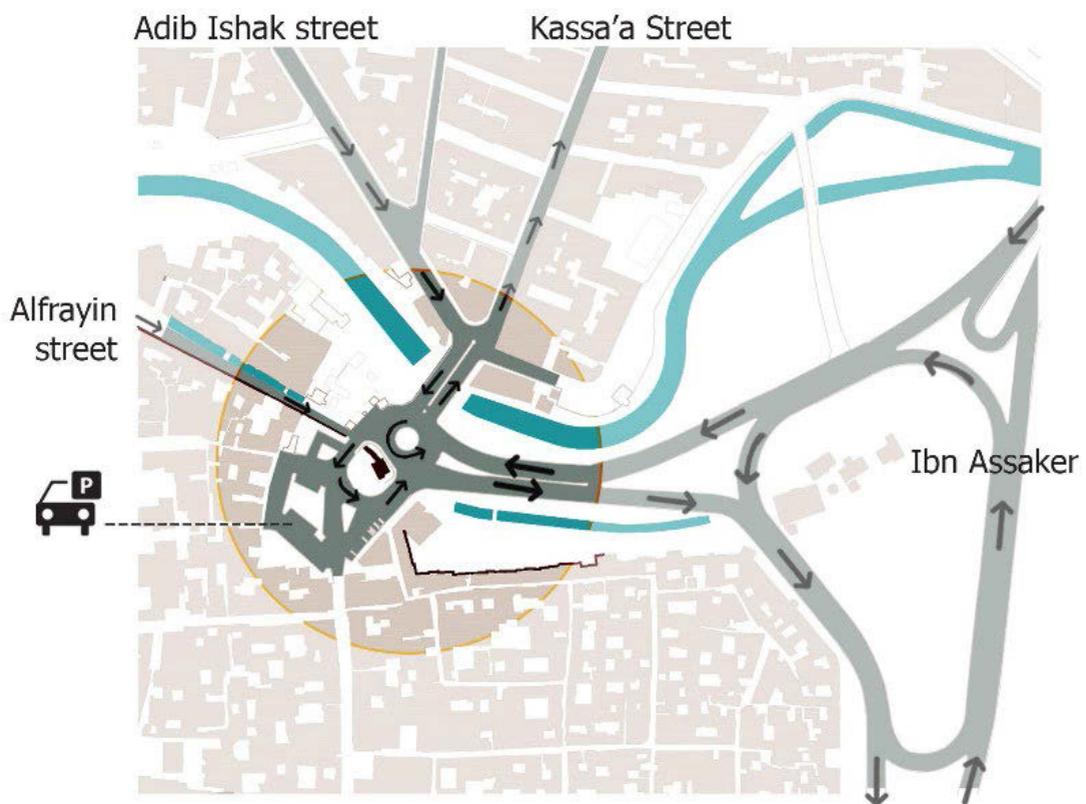


### III. 2. Stages of urban development of Bab Touma square.

Source: by Nawarah Al Basha based on (Alsheikh, 2001, Sabbouh & Almahayni & Fakoush, 1995).

### II. 2. Etapy rozwoju urbanistycznego placu Bab Touma.

Źródło: opracowanie: Nawarah Al Basha na podstawie (Alsheikh, 2001, Sabbouh & Almahayni & Fakoush, 1995).



### III. 3. Traffic flows in Bab Touma square.

### II. 3. Ruch uliczny na placu Bab Touma.

Source/Źródło: by Nawarah Al Basha.

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