

HOUSING, HERITAGE AND URBANISATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



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1. Endangered Residential Vestiges of the Mamluk Period in the Old City of Damascus: The Case of the al-Aglani and al-Tawil Houses

Imane Fayyad

Introduction

For decades, the study of the architecture of the Islamic world has largely been limited to religious edifices like mosques, *madrasas* [schools] and mausoleums, occasionally extending to include palatial structures. Residential architecture, by contrast, has been relegated to a secondary status, as a result of several factors. Houses not lost to the ravages of time are often in disrepair, or else their occupants may oppose the study of them. Moreover, mention of these structures in scholarly sources is very often scarce.

The architectural heritage from the Mamluk period (1250–1516) is a notable example. Poorly preserved and generally little-known, this heritage is now threatened not only by the ongoing war in Syria but also by the absence of a heritage authority to safeguard against destruction in these tumultuous times. This research focuses on the historical, architectural and decorative analysis of Mamluk mansions in Damascus, drawing from the examples of the al-Aglani and al-Tawil houses to

uncover the principles of Mamluk architecture, including building materials, domestic space organisation and lifestyles.

The Mamluks were originally slaves captured from Kipchaq in Central Asia, after which they underwent military training and were introduced to Islam.¹ In this historical context, the Arabic word 'Mamluk', meaning 'owned', denotes a foreign military slave acquired to serve as an elite fighter under the direct authority of the sultan.

Entering the service of the Ayyubid princes (1175–1260), the Mamluks soon gained substantial power. Taking advantage of inefficiency and division among their masters during the Crusades and Mongolian threats, the Mamluks were eventually able to seize power and establish the Mamluk Sultanate, which ruled as one of the major Islamic powers for nearly three hundred years.²

They soon extended their empire to Egypt, Palestine and Syria as well as to the holy cities of Hejaz, reigning with absolute authority until 1517. However, Mamluk dominance began to decline with the opening of European trade routes through the Cape of Good Hope, and their reign was ultimately extinguished by Ottoman expansion in the early sixteenth century.³

The number of studies on traditional housing in regions like the Mediterranean has multiplied in recent years. Although in cities like Cairo and Tunis large houses have been studied extensively, the same attention has not been given to Syria, despite its exceptional heritage. Research on residences in the Syrian capital of Damascus is scarce and often cursory, prompting the need for a twofold analysis encompassing both the medieval origins and the subsequent transformation of this urban space.

Focusing on Mamluk residential remnants, this study aims to contribute to the documentation of Damascene urban domestic heritage through the creation of archives showcasing the originality of

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- 1 David Ayalon, 'The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy', in Ayalon, *Studies on the Mamluks of Egypt 1250–1517* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1977), pp. 311–29.
 - 2 Jean-Claude Garcin, 'Le système militaire mamluk et le blocage de la société musulmane médiévale', *AnIsl*, 24 (1988), 93–94.
 - 3 Julien Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks (XIII^e-XVI^e siècle). Une expérience du pouvoir dans l'islam médiéval* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2014), pp. 41–42.

these endangered buildings. This research builds on archival records from the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), Syria, adjusting many of the plans and elevations with the assistance of Damascus architect Mr. Hussam Ahmad. Cases comprising plans, sections and photographs were compiled using AutoCAD software, representing the first such architectural examination of these buildings. In order to identify the specific characteristics of the Mamluk domestic heritage in Damascus, two examples were selected: the al-Aglani and al-Tawil houses, located in the immediate vicinity of the Umayyad Mosque.

In terms of spatial organisation, typical houses from this period in Damascus feature an open inner courtyard surrounded by habitable rooms and service areas such as kitchens and cellars. This layout is common to both affluent and modest households. The Mamluk architectural style is characterised by distinctive facades utilising two-tone *ablaq* in the building foundations, as observed in the al-Aglani and al-Tawil houses, along with the use of polychrome marble embellished with coloured paste.

Many old houses in Damascus remain inhabited and have undergone several transformations over time. The overcrowding of residences, with multiple families often inhabiting a single dwelling, has led to alterations in spatial structure and function. Additionally, modern comforts such as kitchen and bathroom renovations and reorganisation of room layouts to circumvent courtyards in the winter are common adaptations. These transformations can be seen in both the al-Aglani and al-Tawil residences.

The first challenge to arise during this research was the absence of early historical records, which are unavailable from either the City Hall or DGAM. Additionally, the houses have undergone alterations due to the fragility and deterioration of the original building materials. These necessary renovations have made it difficult to ascertain the residential characteristics of houses from the Mamluk period or the Mamluk-Ottoman transition of the sixteenth century.

Dating the structures accurately poses an additional methodological challenge. In the absence of explicitly dated elements, a comparative method was used based on well-dated historic public buildings such

as *madrasas* and mosques. Comparisons and cross-checking allowed for the formulation of assumptions, with the al-Aqqad residence serving as a reference point for approximate dating due to its satisfactory historical documentation and state of repair. This house, currently situated on cadastral parcel n° 976, is notable for its unique lower-storey vestiges, which likely date back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁴ Below, the locations of the selected houses are presented on a map of the old city of Damascus (Figure 1.1).



Fig. 1.1 Map of old Damascus marking the locations of the selected houses.
Author's illustration, CC BY-NC-ND.

The al-Aglani House

History and Location

Several theories have been offered concerning the history of the al-Aglani house. Carl Watzinger and Karl Wulzinger suggested it

4 Steven Weber and Peder Mortensen, 'The Bayt al-Aqqad between the 15th and the 18th Century', in *Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus, IV, Bait al-Aqqad. The History and Restoration of a House in old Damascus*, ed. by Peder Mortensen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005), pp. 227–79 (p. 228).

was originally the home of the Caliph Yazid, son of Muawiya.⁵ In the fifteenth century, it became a Mamluk palace under the ownership of the Banu Mangak family, after which it was known as Şarim al-Din Ibn Mangak House.⁶

In a 2013 article, Elodie Vigouroux identifies Emir Ibrahim Ibn Mangak as another owner of the house, drawing on two historical testimonies. According to the first, from Ibn Tulan, Mangak owned a house built on the site of Hammam al-Sahn, but it was destroyed in the late fourteenth century and remained derelict until at least 1413.⁷ The second account, that of Ibn al-Himsi, speaks of Mangak's construction of the house over the ruins of the Umayyad Mosque, stating that it was burned by Tamerlan in 1401. Vigouroux also indicates that the house was named after the prominent Ottoman al-Aglani family following their intermarriage with the Mangaks.

Located east of the Umayyad Mosque, the al-Agani House has recently been converted into a commercial property. It currently occupies three parcels of land in the al-Amarah al-Gawwaniyya/Bab al-Barid District. This includes parcel n°162, which contains the largest concentration of ruins and is thus the focus of this research. The only detailed study of the al-Aglani residence was conducted by Riham al-Hagg during his restoration of the house in 2014.⁸ The present research draws upon the author's 2011 survey of the oldest part of the house. This structure now consists of three storeys, of which only the ground floor is relevant to the present study. Here, two features are especially noteworthy: the exterior northern facade, with a large portal overlooking the street, and the interior southern facade (Figure 1.2).

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- 5 Carl Watzinger and Karl Wulzinger, *Damaskus die Islamische Stadt*, 2 vols, 2nd edn ([Berlin and Leipzig] Damascus: Walter de Gruyter & Co, [1924] 1984), II, 66.
 - 6 Elodie Vigouroux, *Damas après Tamerlan étude historique et archéologique d'une renaissance (1401–1481)* (Paris: Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011), p. 63.
 - 7 Elodie Vigouroux, 'Les Banu Mangak à Damas. Capital social, enracinement local et gestion patrimoniale d'une famille d'*awlad al-nas* à l'époque mamelouke', *AnIsI*, 47 (2013), 197–233 (pp. 205–06).
 - 8 Riham al-Hagg, *Masaru Dar al-Aglani* (Damascus: University of Damascus, 2014), pp. 11–12.

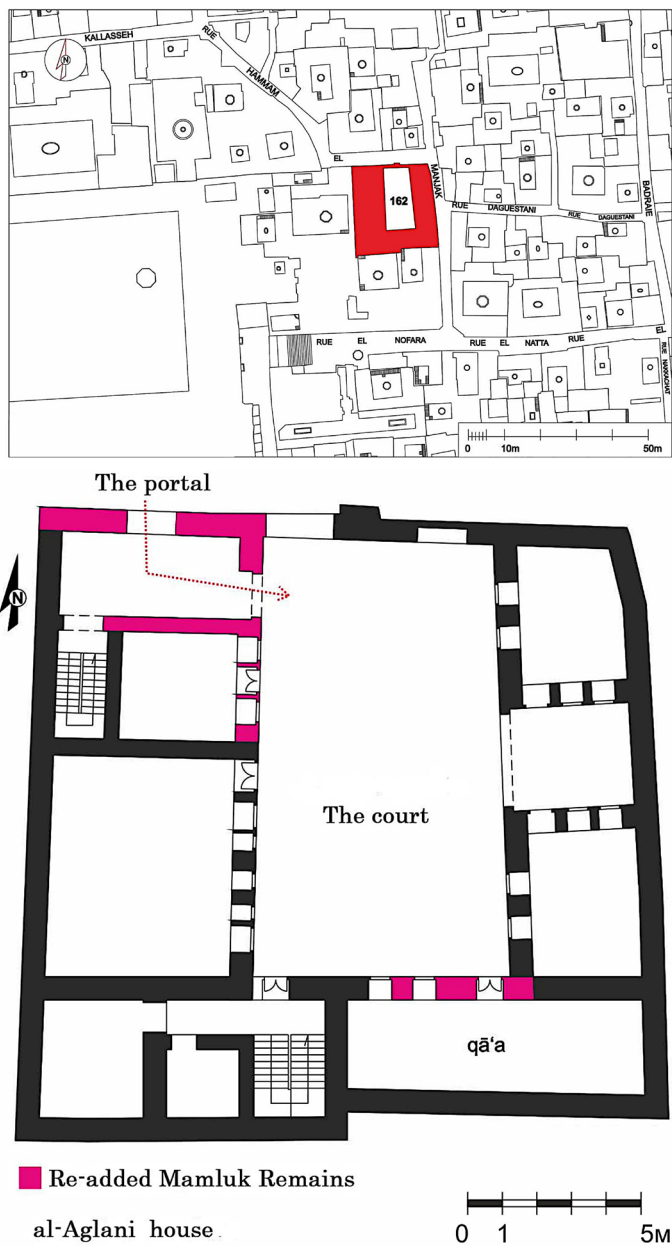


Fig. 1.2 The al-Aglani House: cadastral plan showing the house and ground floor plan. Author’s illustration, CC BY-NC-ND.

The Northern Facade and Portal

The house's northern facade rests atop what appears to be repurposed Roman foundations. The uneven rubble stones, measuring approximately 0.70 metres in size, are similar to those observed in the al-Aqqad house. The foundations consist of irregular stones approximately 0.27 metres high, constructed of cut stones of basalt and limestone and reaching a height of approximately 1.60 meters. The foundations of buildings constructed in Damascus during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries typically average around 0.30 metres in depth, while during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the average depth was reduced to approximately 0.22 metres. With few exceptions to this rule, the majority of Damascene structures with foundations measuring less than 0.30 metres can be confidently dated back to this period.⁹

The rest of the facade has been recently redesigned (Figure 1.3). In the centre, a porch terminating in a tri-lobed arch spans the height of the facade. Within this porch, a 0.30 metre recess accommodates a large slightly pointed arched portal enclosing a smaller door known as a *luha*. This typical feature of al-Saqqa Amini homes allows for convenient access without the need to open the main door.

Preserving elements of its original construction, the house features a courtyard with two noteworthy facades to the south and north. The walls of these facades are adorned with geometric panels likely dating back to the Mamluk period in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Figure 1.4).¹⁰

9 Marianne Boqvist, 'Building Materials and Construction Techniques', in *Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus, IV, Bait al-Aqqad. The History and Restoration of a House in old Damascus*, ed. by Peder Mortensen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005), pp. 129–39 (p. 135).

10 Imane Fayyad, *L'habitat domestique à Damas, Homs et Hama aux époques mamelouke et ottomane (XIII^e-XVIII^e siècle)* (Paris: Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, 2016), p. 131.

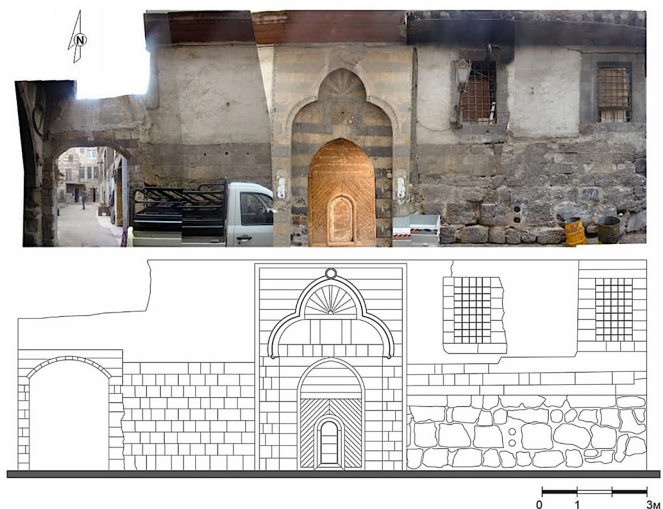


Fig. 1.3 The al-Aglani house: elevation of the exterior north facade. Author’s photograph and illustration, 2012, CC BY-NC-ND.

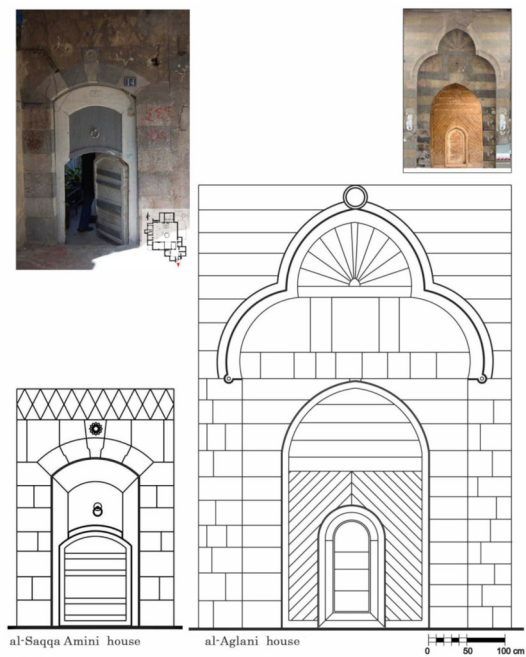


Fig. 1.4 Two examples of portals with *huha*. Author’s photographs and illustrations, 2012, CC BY-NC-ND.

Above the portal, the wall consists of alternating *ablaq* rows, which scholars suggest also date back to the Mamluk period.¹¹ This design resembles the northern facade of the al-Aqqad house as well as another house in the Qabr Atika District. At the end of the portal, a square panel connected to the porch frame by a decorative buckle features geometric black and white stars topped by a semicircle embellished with black and white rays. This opening duplicates the gate and may have allowed guests to enter the building without disrupting the privacy of family life. The eastern end of the facade consists of a low arch leading to a courtyard, constructed with reused *ablaq* stones partially adorned with rosettes. Inside the courtyard, remnants of a fountain can be found in a shallow niche with a slightly arched top decorated with *ablaq*. In the rear is a square panel embellished with stars and geometric patterns similar to those of the porch. The presence of the fountain testifies to the house's importance, raising questions as to whether it served as a water supply source for the family and whether it was accessible to the local public. Watzinger and Wulzinger date its origins back to the Mamluk in the fifteenth century (Figure 1.5).¹²

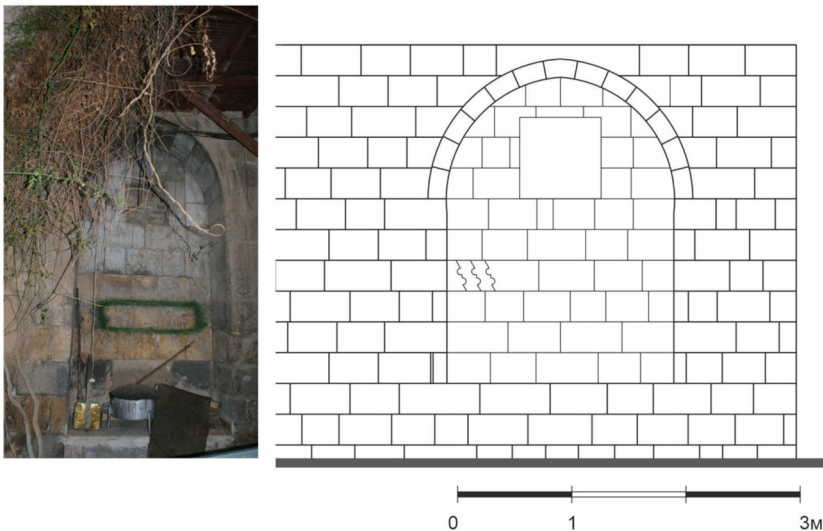


Fig. 1.5 The al-Aglani house: elevation of the fountain of the north interior facade.
Author's photograph and illustration, 2012, CC BY-NC-ND.

11 Boqvist, 'Building Materials and Construction Techniques', p. 135.

12 Watzinger and Wulzinger, *Damaskus die Islamische Stadt*, II, 66.

In contrast to the right half of the facade, which was redesigned during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries save for a single door framed by an *ablaq* pattern, the left half of the facade is more significant and well preserved. Facing north, this section features five windows positioned to the right of a door topped by two rectangular windows, separated from the upper level by two ornamental wave friezes. These two windows are framed by slightly pointed arches, between which is a circular panel with predominantly geometric ornaments. Two bands, one of *ablaq* and the other of carved limestone, underly each window. Two framing strips are connected to the top of the arches by a buckle of carved limestone. The western end resembles the facade of the al-Saqifa Mosque, suggesting it dates back to the Mamluk period (Figure 1.6). The lower part of the wall is made up of a number of decorated carved stones, which have been repurposed and are likely of Mamluk origin. Two rectangular windows with a falling arch lintel can also be dated to the Mamluk period (Figure 1.7).

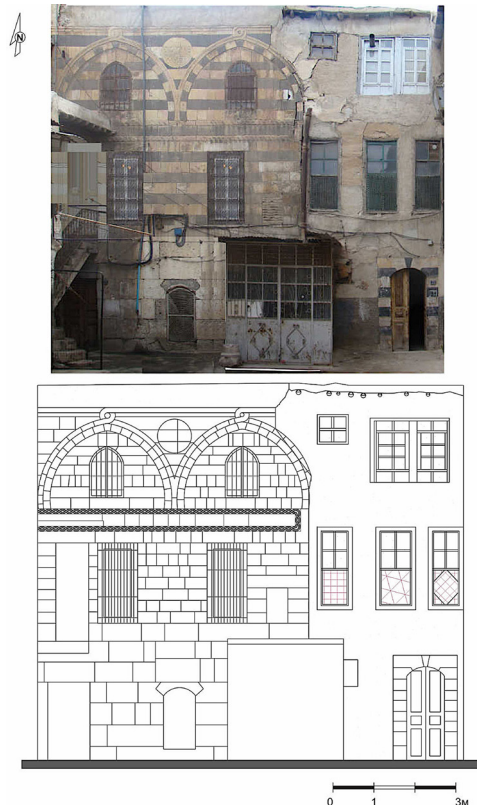


Fig. 1.6 The al-Aglani house: elevation of the interior south facade. Author's photograph and illustration, 2012, CC BY-NC-ND.

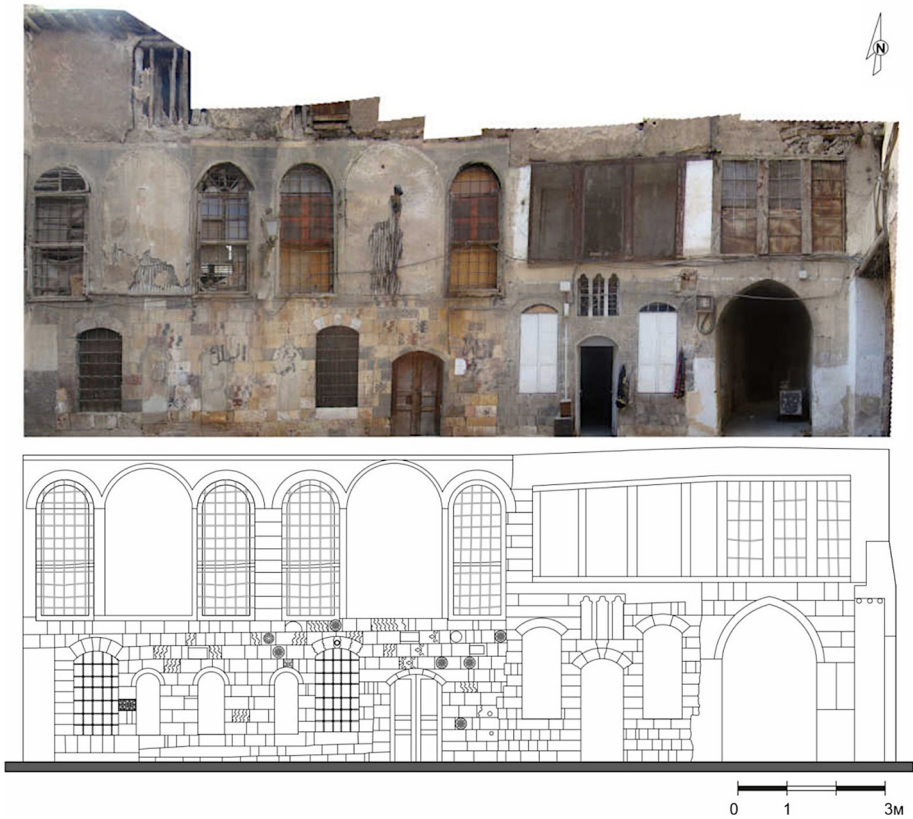


Fig. 1.7 The al-Aglani house: elevation of the interior eastern facade. Author's photograph and illustration, 2012, CC BY-NC-ND.

The al-Tawil House

History and Location

The architectural style of the al-Tawil residence is representative of the traditional Damascene house, evolving from the sixteenth century until the late Ottoman period in the eighteenth century. According to extracts from the land register of the old city of Damascus, the house was renovated in 1840, introducing the European architectural influence of the French rococo and Italian baroque styles.

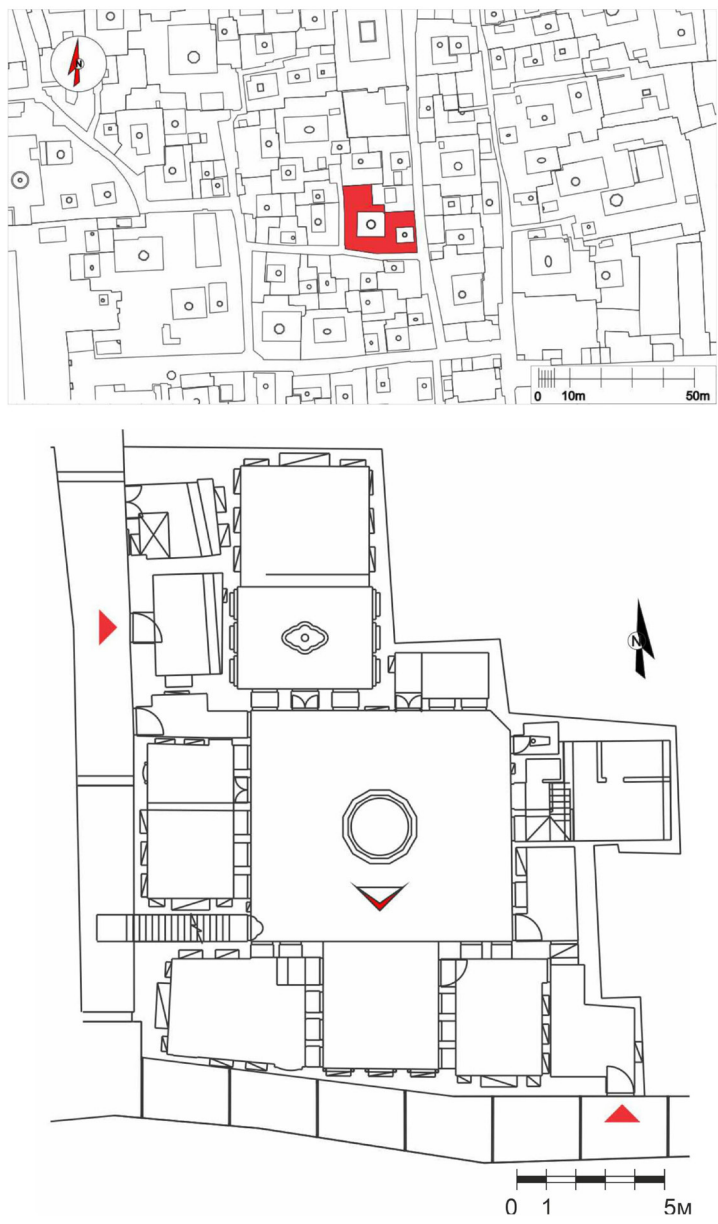


Fig. 1.8 The al-Tawil house: cadastral plan situating the house and plan of the ground floor. Illustration by Mohammad Daruis and the author, 2012, CC BY-NC-ND.

Despite retaining much of its historical character, the al-Tawil residence has not been subject to extensive study, save for during a 2009 restoration project by architect Mohammad Darius.¹³ In 2012, an archaeological survey was conducted by the author on the house's oldest segment. Located in the heart of the old city, east of the Great Umayyad Mosque, the house belongs to the al-Tawil family. It is currently registered under parcel n°279-2, al-Amarah al-Gawwaniyya. The north side of the house faces the main street leading toward Nafura, while the south side borders Dagstani Alley. There are two covered entries to the house, one on its west facade in a recess formed by Dagstani Alley, and one on its south facade.

According to the 1934 cadastral plan of the old city, the house was divided into three independent residences. The structure consists of two storeys, covering an area of 310.04 square metres. The ground floor included an inner courtyard, an *iwan*,¹⁴ a kitchen, a small cellar, reception or living areas (*qa'a*), and utility rooms. Upstairs, there were six living rooms (Figure 1.8).

Every entrance to the house leads through a rectangular courtyard enclosing an octagonal stone pool. Four *qa'a*, or reception rooms, are arranged around the courtyard: two on the south side beside the *iwan*, and three facing each other on the north, west and east sides. These rooms traditionally vary in dimension and location, and although their use is subject to speculation, the abundant ornamentation suggests they were likely reception spaces. However, this applies only to those located on the ground floor. Now we turn to the element of greatest interest to this study: the *iwan*, on the southern side of the courtyard, which contains the oldest likely remnants of the sixteenth-century Mamluk period.

The *Iwan*

Part of the main facade of the house, the *iwan* is a three-walled rectangular chamber measuring 4.23 metres wide and 7.82 metres high.

13 Mohammad Daruis, *Tautiq wa Tarmim Bayt al-Tawil- al-Amarah al-Gawwaniyya-Dimasq al-Qadimah* (Damascus: University of Damascus, 2009), pp. 41–42.

14 It is a room made up of three walls, the fourth opening through a large arch onto the interior courtyard (Fayyad, *L'habitat domestique à Damas*, p. 335).

Constructed with white and black stones, it is crowned by a white limestone pediment with a cornice adorned with decorative stylised geometric shapes. A similar white limestone cornice runs along the entire length of the facade. Frames featuring this same pattern can be found on other sixteenth-century buildings including the al-Aqqad house, completed in 1526.¹⁵

The *iwān* is a room opening into the courtyard, facing entirely north on account of a slightly dropped arch made of two-tone white and black keystones. These prominent limestone patterns encroach upon the stone ornaments of the arch moulding.

The *ablaq* technique was used for both the top and bottom of the arch, typical of sixteenth-century architecture. Its voussoirs are adorned with two successive friezes of eight-pointed stars, a pattern which also appears in the intrados, complemented by stylised coloured rosettes in coloured paste. The arch supports are made of decorated calcareous stones, as in al-Aqqad house. The ceiling is simple, comprising an arrangement of wooden beams. Within the *iwān*, three recesses are featured on each wall, along with two smaller niches in the back wall. The lowered arch lintels are inlaid with rosettes and topped by panels embellished in the European French rococo and Italian baroque styles (Figure 1.9).

Adjacent to the courtyard, the first room west of the *iwān* is accessed through a door surrounded by a rectangular frame with a broken arch, the lintel of which is decorated at its centre with a white, red and black geometric pattern made of coloured paste. This rectangular room may have been used as a living room.

No traces of older decoration are visible alongside the aforementioned European-style decorative elements. Several *kutbiyya*, a kind of open cupboard with two shelves for exhibiting valuable items, line the walls, extending to the height of the windowsills. The second room, east of the *iwān*, features a door and three windows opening onto the *iwān*. However, assumptions about the floor and ceiling coatings cannot be made with certainty, and the current flooring has a modern coating.

15 Daruis, *Tautiq wa Tarmim Bayt*, pp. 41–42.

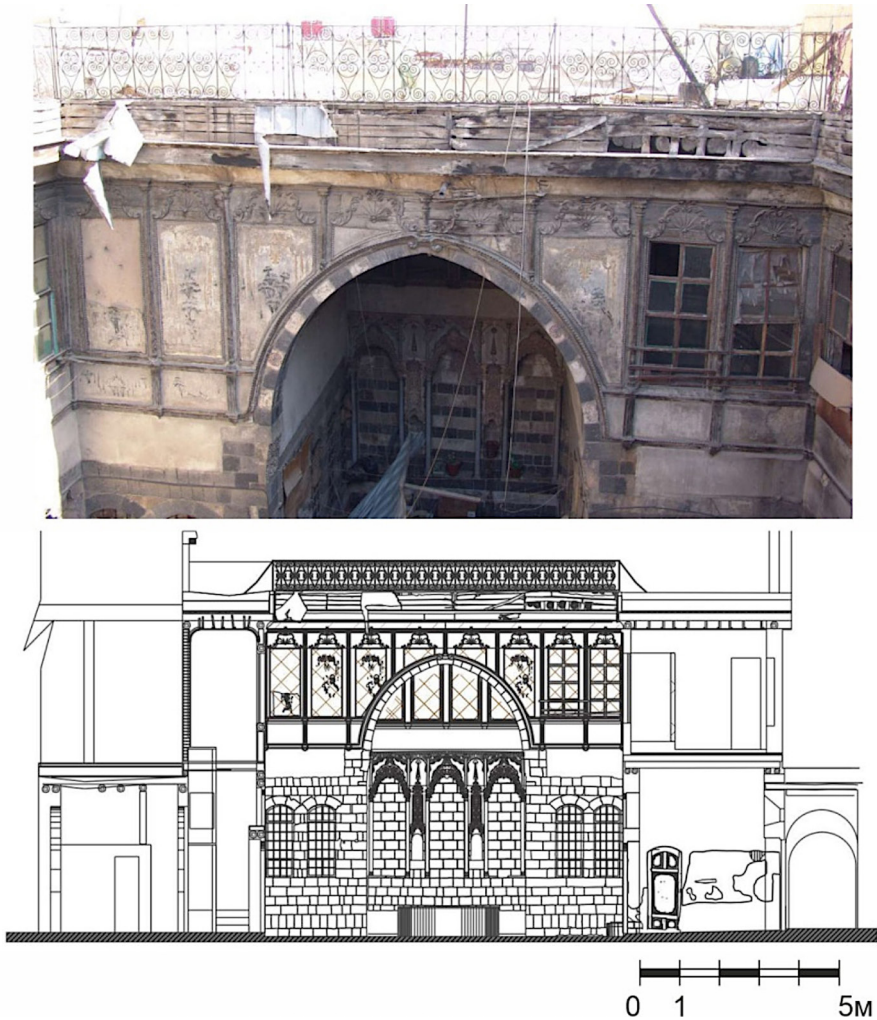


Fig. 1.9 The al-Tawil house: view of the south facade (*iwān*) and its arch. Author's photograph and illustration, 2012, CC BY-NC-ND.

Conclusion

This study has identified historical, architectural and decorative characteristics of Mamluk mansions in Damascus, focusing on the examples of the al-Aglani and al-Tawil houses. At the former, the height of the limestone and black basalt foundations as well as the northern

and southern facades have been determined likely to date back to the Mamluk period in the fifteenth century, as they are markedly similar to the al-Aqqad house's northern facade. Furthermore, the initial construction elements of the al-Aglani reception rooms may also derive from this era, a claim supported by the resemblance of their brickwork to that of the fifteenth-century facade of Qabr Atika's house. The Nadir house, near the Tawrizi Mosque in the Sagur District has a facade likely dating to the end of the fifteenth century, which has similarities with the al-Tawil house.¹⁶ According to the current owner, the richly decorated facade is that of the mausoleum of Abu Sufyan.¹⁷ As we were unable to enter the house, we based our study of this facade on the photos taken by Steven Weber and Marianne Boqvist.¹⁸

On the basis of these historical elements, it is possible to identify certain consistent characteristics of Mamluk residential architecture in Damascus from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in terms of construction, spatial organisation and ornamentation. The predominant building materials include limestone for bedrocks, door/window frames, baked clay for the upper sections of walls, lime for wall coating and painted wood for ceilings. Building techniques typically involve horizontal layers of medium-sized cut stone and wood quoins filled with mortar (mud bricks) for wall construction. Ceilings feature alternating beams and cob.

The present chapter has included only two houses as samples from a wider body of research on residential architecture in Damascus. Thus, the continuation of this research will entail expanding the scope of the study to include residences in various neighbourhoods of old Damascus, with the prospect of establishing a comprehensive typology of these houses.

16 Boqvist, 'Building Materials and Construction Techniques', p. 135.

17 Weber and Mortensen, 'The Bayt al-Aqqad', pp. 234–35.

18 For more about this facade, see Fayyad, *L'habitat domestique à Damas*, p. 79 and figures 85–86.

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