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## **ARCHITECTURAL AND DECORATIVE ELEMENTS OF DAMASCUS PUBLIC BUILDINGS DURING THE PERIOD OF THE FRENCH MANDATE**

*The article is devoted to the study of the decoration and architectural details of the buildings constructed in the Damascus city center from the beginning of the French Mandate period until the beginning of Syrian independence. Damascus, being a witness of many civilizations, remained an eternal city. It has long stood out from other cities for its distinctive features, borrowing knowledge and art forms from different cultures and civilizations, and reintegrating them into its unique heritage.*

*The article aims to determine the artistic and architectural origins, materials and technical methods used in construction that characterized the facades of the buildings and their various details during the French Mandate period. The study also seeks to explore the global and local influences that accompanied these buildings, which were the nucleus of change, and the reflection of these influences on the architectural and artistic design foundations of these buildings. The changes occurred to the image of the city as a result of that process are at the focus of the study as well. Evaluation of these alterations would show whether these buildings were affected by European architectural trends that prevailed in that period of time or whether they remained related to the local architectural environment in terms of architectural development.*

*The purpose of this article is to study and analyze the artistic and decorative elements of the public buildings in Damascus city erected during the French Mandate period and their European architectural origins.*

**Keywords:** *Damascus, Syrian architecture, the French Mandate, European architecture, decoration, traditional architecture*

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## **АРХИТЕКТУРНЫЕ И ДЕКОРАТИВНЫЕ ЭЛЕМЕНТЫ ОБЩЕСТВЕННЫХ ЗДАНИЙ ДАМАСКА В ПЕРИОД ФРАНЦУЗСКОГО МАНДАТА**

*Статья посвящена изучению декора и архитектурных деталей зданий Дамаска периода Французского Мандата. Исследованы здания, расположенные в центральной части города, которая в наибольшей степени подверглась влиянию европейской культурной традиции. Здесь были построены первые общественные здания, отвечающие функционально-планировочным и конструктивным приемам, сложившимся в первую очередь во Франции. Декоративное убранство зданий центральной части города также отвечало тенденциям европейской архитектуры начала XX в. Вместе с тем в архитектуре Дамаска отразилось многообразное культурное наследие вечного города. Смешение европейских и местных традиций стало основой уникального стиля дамаскской архитектуры.*

*Статья направлена на изучение художественных и архитектурных основ, строительных и отделочных материалов, технических приемов, используемых в строительстве зданий в период Французского Мандата, кроме того, в ней отмечены различные влияния, определившие облик этих зданий.*

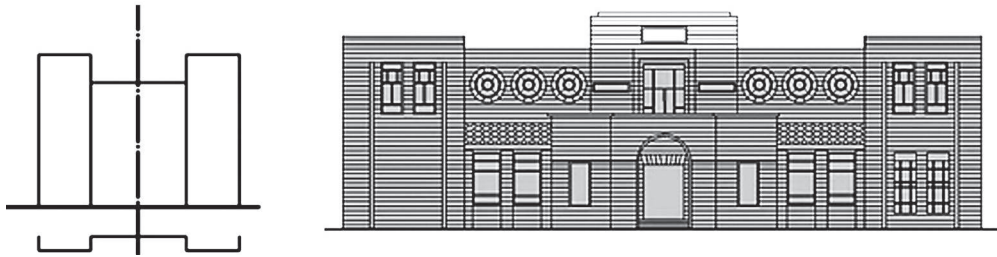
**Ключевые слова:** *Дамаск, сирийская архитектура, французский мандат, европейская архитектура, традиционная архитектура*

The article is devoted to the Syrian architecture of the French Mandate period, which lasted throughout the first half of the 20th

century CE (1920–1946). The period of fundamental transformations in the architecture of Damascus is associated with the penetration



Il. 1. Strongly protruding central risalit in the composition of the facade of the water management corporation. 1936 (the scheme is made by the author)

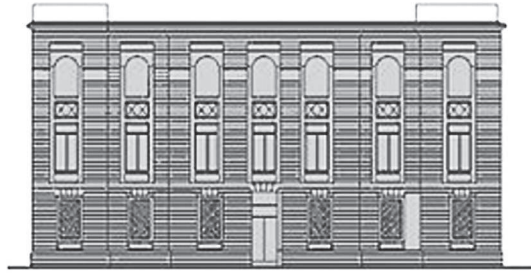
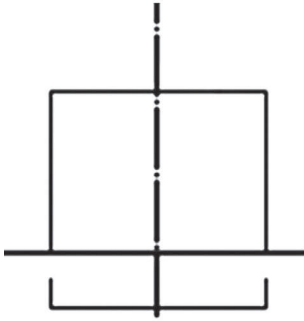


Il. 2. Symmetrical facade in the composition of the facade of Ministry of Health in Damascus. 1930 (the scheme is made by the author)

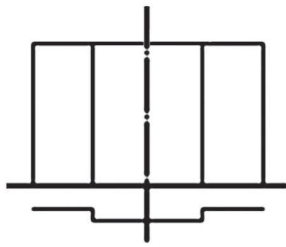
of the Western world empires and the introduction of European culture. Despite the fact that the connection between East and West through various trade contacts has existed for several millennia, the modern stage of influence on the country's architecture began to manifest itself only during the formation of the Eurocentric world system, the starting point of which was the period of the Great Geographical Discoveries.

Although this phenomenon was common for almost all the regions of the country where the development of the centers by European influence and the foundation of new styles around them as a result of acculturation of both Western and Eastern cultures were observed, it received the greatest manifestation and stylistic diversity in the Syrian capital, Damascus.

The compositional division of the facades retained the European principles, in which preference was given to the central axial symmetry. As a rule, horizontal thrust was emphasized. It prevailed over vertical articulation. In many respects, this effect was enhanced due to the inconsistency of the vertical division at different levels, in which the blades, pilasters or columns were located on different vertical axes, which violated the tectonic integrity of the object (Al-Bahnasi 1981: 72). The compositional arrangement of facades can be divided into following categories — strongly protruding central avant-corps (il. 1), symmetrical facade (il. 2), flat facade with a uniform rhythm of fenestration (il. 3), and symmetrical facade with central avant-corps (il. 4).



Il. 3. Flat facade with a uniform rhythm of fenestration in the Department of Agriculture. 1936. (the scheme is made by the author)



Il. 4. Symmetrical facade with central an avant-corps of the facade of the Damascus University presidency building. 1922–1923 (the scheme is made by the author)

The idea of a horizontal division of the facades emerged in correspondence with the continuous stone rows. Moreover, horizontal sills are often found under windows, so arelintels over rectangular windows. Thus repeating models were adopted, and these stone rows are repeated at fixed distances.

Repetition in the geometric elements of the facade, such as windows and balconies, is noticeable. In order to avoid the excess of uniform elements on the facades, some decorative details were introduced. Protruding portals were used in order to highlight the entrance (Al-Bahnasi 1981: 72) (il. 5).

The ornaments — some decorative geometric elements such as squares with geometric motifs that adorn the white surfaces of the facades were repeated, as well as frequent decorative elements used to decorate the surface of a building.

Some gradation of the main facades to emphasize the importance of the middle and high sections located on the axis of the facades were made (Ali 1998: 25). Considering the evolution of the decorative elements of city buildings, can be identified a high degree of borrowing and the beginning of the use of Western elements in the early periods of the development of Syrian architecture.

It was the Europeanized facades that became a distinctive feature of architecture of the aforementioned period, while traditional structural and planning schemes could have been preserved. That happened through the relative ease of borrowing decorative elements, which in contrast to space-planning and town-building solutions did not need a thorough analysis and a high level of development of construction production (Ali 1998: 26) (il. 6).



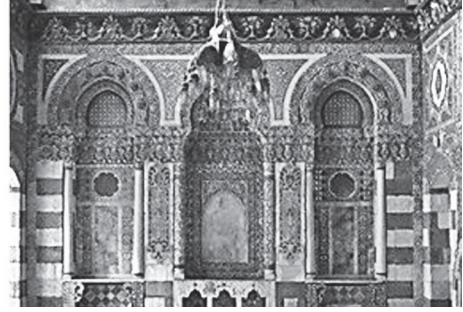
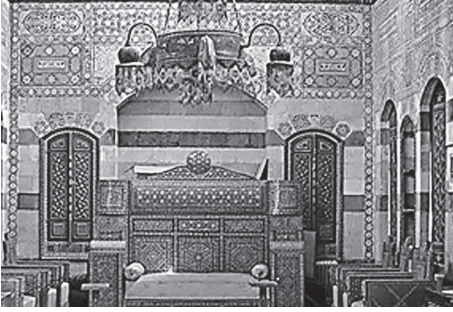
Il. 5. The main facade of Syrian Parliament, built in 1928 (photo of the author, 2018)



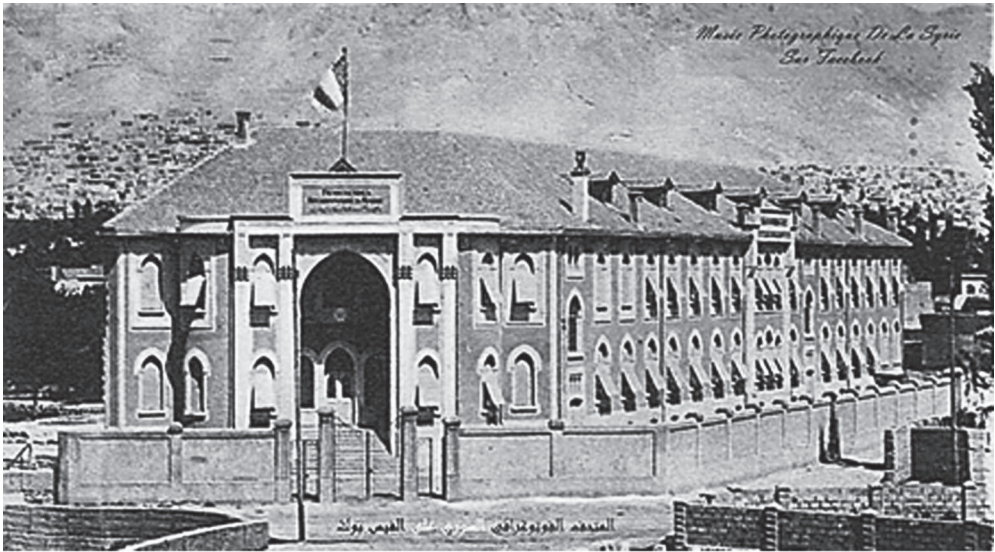
Il. 6. The decorative elements of the facade of the Ministry of Technology and Communications, built in 1939 (photo of the author, 2018)

The opposite effect of this approach was in its high degree of transformation. It was caused by the lack of understanding by local architects of the semantics and tectonics of European architecture and its interpretation from the standpoint of the local culture

(Abdoulas 1982: 42). Thus, the decor of the outer facades received the greatest degree of borrowing, while the inner courtyard continued to be executed using traditional motives, or, at the later stages of its development, it copied the solutions found on the exteriors.



Il. 7. The decorative elements in the traditional architecture of Damascus (photo of the author, 2016)



Il. 8. A perspective of the Franciscan school, built in 1925 (Syrian History)

Historically, the traditional architecture of Damascus is characterized by the use of various types of decorative elements, for example, carved in stone, brick and wood. Ceramic and limestone sculptures and paintings were actively used as well (il. 7).

With the further development of architecture, there was a gradual complication of decor, detailing, as well as an increase in its volume, when it reached the point of redundancy, at which its individual elements ceased to be clearly perceived. At the same time, there was a change in the motives

and design of the decorative elements. So at the initial stage, during the active use of brick elements, the level of decoration was rather weak (Abdoulas 1982: 44) (il. 8).

Mostly geometric compositions of brickwork prevailed. With the transition towards concrete and cement, the widespread use of stucco elements began. The attention was paid to the design of the upper part of buildings, in which parapets and balustrades were accentuated.

Considering decorative elements, two main directions of their evolution can be



Il. 9. The main facade of Umayyah hotel in Damascus, built in 1931 (Pinterest)

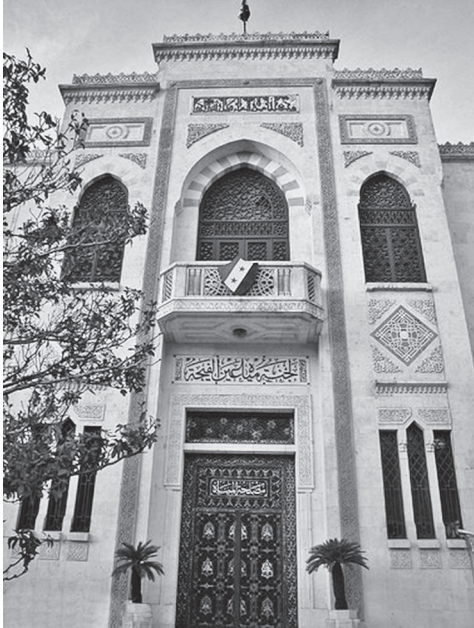
distinguished. The first is the use of traditional elements, which gradually transformed with the development of Syrian architecture. The second type includes adopted from the Western architecture decorative elements, which, as a rule, did not have any analogues in Syria (*Kanavati* 2001: 67).

The traditional decor and the technique of its implementation have been largely preserved. This is especially true of the period prior to the 1920s. The decor itself can be divided into several large groups: wood, metal, brick and iron carvings; sculpture made of ceramics and lime; and frescoes.

Frescoes played an important role in the decoration. They could be located both on the plane surfaces of the facades, especially above the door and window openings, or they were used as an interior decoration. The other types of decor were replaced with imported materials as they were gradually becoming more Europeanized.

Some decorative details at the entrances of the buildings, as well as the brackets and elements of balconies were the distinctive feature of that period (*Kanavati* 2001: 68).

Some rhythmic consistency is evident in the fenestration of a single facade, it was achieved through the conscious usage of



Il. 10. The main facade of the Water Corporation building, built in 1932 (DAWSSA)

fixed proportions and modules in window placement (il. 9).

Considering the design of eaves, it is necessary to note a gradual shift away from wooden structures in favor of reinforced concrete and cutting metal structures. The uneven elaboration of decoration of the column capitals and balustrades is noticeable. A distinctive feature was the application of some kind of standardized decorative elements that were used in various types of structures in the region and were actively developed in the 1920s (*Suvazhit* 1934: 421).

The evolution of the adopted elements largely reflects the perception of the European architecture by local architects. If at the initial stages they were correlated with local analogs and composed on their basis, by the end of the 19th — beginning of the 20th centuries they received their own independent development. At the same

time, the elements have significantly transformed since the end of the 1920s, there is a tendency to improve their forms, which is reflected in the reduction of excessive decor and the approximation of the borrowed elements to European canons in which local motives could be deliberately added (*Suvazhit* 1934: 422).

The initial stage in the development of Syrian architecture was primarily expressed in the transformation of national elements that continued to exist throughout the entire period before the French Mandate. In later constructions of the main types of architecture, traditional elements are much less common, but their transformation under the influence of western models was further developed.

Considering the buildings of 1920–1946, we can detect a tendency to move away from the use of traditional elements in an unchanged state. The entrances underwent minor changes; they also, along with the frieze, remained one of the most decorated parts of the buildings. The traditional design of window openings was almost completely replaced by Western elements (*Al-Munajjid* 2001: 23). That was due to the fact that the windows of the external facades in historical architecture often played the role of ventilation openings, their area was minimal and they were not decorated. They also opened into the courtyard (il. 10).

At the same time, variations of concrete balusters appeared. They could be tetrahedral in cross section, which resembled traditional elements hewn from stone, or round in cross section, reminiscent of the European samples (*Al-Munajjid* 2001: 24).

Despite the significant role of traditional architecture in the formation of buildings in Damascus, it mainly served as a backbone on which borrowed elements were layered, as a result of which most of the decorative designs of the facades were



Il. 11. The main façade of the Orient hotel in Damascus, built in 1934 (photo of the author, 2018)

an interpretation or a copy of European counterparts. The degree of manifestation of such borrowings differed significantly in different buildings.

Considering large adopted elements of buildings that affected the volumetric composition, bay windows can be distinguished. Balconies are ubiquitous. Considering the decorative design of facades, in addition to the above-mentioned techniques, one can single out the design of window and door openings which were worked out to the greatest extent (*Abdoulas* 2003: 20–25).

The window-sill space was richly decorated usually with geometric ornaments; in rare cases, pseudo-balustrades were used.

Considering the arcs used, it is worth paying attention to the variety of forms and their semantic meaning. The cornices could be combined with a pitched roof, and with balustrades or parapets.

Considering the design schemes, one can distinguish particular groups of construction techniques used by local architects. The first includes the traditional designs that became widespread during the Ottoman Empire period. The use of new structural materials presupposed the de-

velopment of the technological base of the city, which resulted in the fact that they were initially imported to the region from abroad before they established their local production, followed by a massive replacement of traditional building materials (*Basili* 1962: 152). At the same time, such a replacement at the initial stages was of a point nature and represented a synthesis of traditional and borrowed structural elements.

Reinforced concrete and metal structures became widespread and began to be used in the most complex assemblies and in ceilings. At the same time, the design schemes continued to be based on the developments of the traditional architecture. The planning system has undergone significant changes, which is largely due to the evolution of traditional typologies of buildings. With the integration of European architecture into the urban fabric, as well as the improvement of the material and technical base, the process of a complete transition to the Europeanized building materials began followed by a gradual transition to frame and wall reinforced concrete systems borrowed from Western examples (*Valter* 2002: 288). Thus, in these buildings



there was a consistent replacement of traditional schemes with European patterns through the substitution of building materials and structural solutions, as well as the subsequent modernization of the planning structure (il. 11).

## Conclusions

Distinctive traits of the traditional Syrian architecture in its development were a high level of regulation, a hierarchical structure and adherence to tradition, which were determined by philosophical and worldview concepts. That approach led to the evolutionary development of architecture enshrined in tracts and sets of rules, in which space-planning and decorative solutions carried a semantic load, which reduced the degree of their possible transformation. Faced with the process of Europeanization of traditional architecture, the existing elements began to gradually transform with the preservation of the historical semantic interpretation. Elements that did not have any analogues in traditional architecture were copied, while undergoing transformation due to the ignorance of the local builders of the canons of Western culture and interpreted them from the standpoint of local semantics (Al-Azhari 1990: 71–74). The greatest changes were made to the decorative elements that were quickly integrated or completely replaced by Europeanized designs. At the same time, the space-planning system over a long period of time continued to rely on the principles of national architecture and was a subject to changes only with a fairly long-term impact from the European culture.

Generally, traditional decorative elements were rarely used unchanged, mainly on the periphery of the development of Syrian Western architecture. More often they were presented in transformed forms,

or as separate elements in the decor. Stucco molding and painting which carried the main semantic load underwent the smallest changes.

The borrowed elements are mainly represented by parts of the facades, which had no analogues in traditional Syrian architecture. The most characteristic elements of the western buildings facades, such as order system, arcades, pediment finishes and compositional facade structure, were taken as a pattern. Their use is characterized by a high degree of transformation, as well as by attempts in their synthesis with elements of traditional architecture.

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