

Experiences of war and peace in public spaces—Aleppo city case study

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ABSTRACT: Urban public spaces are the interface of any city that could tell about the city's dynamic and status quo. In addition, Urban public spaces play a pivotal role in shaping societies' dynamics and can significantly affect conflict and peacebuilding initiatives. In a context marked by Conflict's profound impact, this article aims to contribute to the knowledge base for informed urban interventions that foster positive interactions and reconciliation in post-conflict cities. The article seeks to explore the intricate relationship between urban spaces and their influence on war or to promote sustainable peacebuilding through investigating the various roles of the urban public spaces during the war and peacetimes via residents' experiences of the diverse spaces' functions that shaped the city's status quo. In addition, considering the interplay of social dynamics, conflict history, and the mental spatial map of cities in public urban spaces can influence lasting peace or upcoming conflicts. This article focuses on Aleppo as a case study, understanding the positive and negative experiences from the residents' perspective before and during the current war in Syria, and even distinguishes between two periods during the recent war, which are the active violence and after the end of the direct active violence, where it could inform the decision-makers and urban planners on the areas of focus while developing post-war urban public spaces to ensure its positive role in fostering peace and be able to deal with the social dynamic and the mental spatial map that developed along with the conflict history. The paper utilised a mixed-methods approach, encompassing a case study review of Aleppo City from an urban perspective and fieldwork involving focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with Aleppian from different backgrounds and geographic areas that represent the social dynamic of the city, as well as approached Aleppian who are still in living in the city and those who flee out of it to ensure the coverage of different political direction in addition field work engaged with academia and technical from the city who shared their knowledge and experiences working in the city. Participants were prompted to reflect on their pre-war familiarity with public places and share their experiences. These experiences were categorized by enabling a comprehensive understanding of how conflict context influenced these spaces. The article results offer an understanding of the peace-guiding functions of the urban public spaces based on the city residents' experiences that could inform architects and urban planners in designing spaces conducive to sustainable peacebuilding. The article's findings underscore the importance of strategically designed urban public spaces in promoting peace and social cohesion.

Keywords: peacebuilding; war and conflict; public spaces; urban planning

1. Introduction

Most post-war reconstruction interventions consider revitalizing public spaces an appealing starting point used as an indicator for a new phase and transitioning from

conflict to peace. It is also considered a target for the fighting parties in most war cases (Selvelli, 2017). For this reason, understanding how urban public spaces could pave the way for upcoming wars or foster sustainable peacebuilding is necessary, in addition to the vital role of urban planners and architects that could play a positive role in the city's reality and future. The article aims to investigate the role of urban public spaces in war and peace by comprehending the diverse experiences of residents within these spaces. This understanding helps define these spaces' functions during periods of conflict and peace, guiding architects and urban planners in effective planning and design of public urban spaces. to promote enduring peace by addressing the city's social dynamics in relation to its conflict history and the development of mental spatial maps as part of post-war reconstruction and development projects. Public spaces are a living culture that can show the various identities in the city, as well as a reflection of the democratic practices and political situation of the country, where people can raise their voices on the issues of their concerns through public spaces and streets and able to activate their citizenship (Bollens, 2012).

For this reason, it has a significant role in grounding the citizenship implication as part of promoting democratic practices through emphasizing the rights and responsibilities of the citizens on a practical and small-scale level, ultimately shaping the city's political frame, which highlights the importance of dealing with urban public spaces at neighborhood and city level and being able to bridge between them to ensure the healthy interactive dynamic across the city (Di Masso, 2015). Ultimately, it constructs citizenship, belonging, recognition, rights, and ownership, where citizenship is experienced, performed, challenged, and demanded daily. Through activating the urban public spaces' role in peacebuilding, the cities might have better chances for lasting peace and deal with the root causes of the war (Di Masso, 2015). This article examines how public urban spaces can be affected by and affect peace and war, drawing on the perspectives of Aleppo city residents to define the different functions of the public spaces during war and peacetime. It is essential to inform architects, urban planners and decision-makers to deal with the planning and design of public spaces as interactive processes that could lead to creating and rehabilitating spaces that can foster lasting peace.

Ultimately, the social and cultural life of the urban spaces is part of the broader state attitude, political structure and economic systems. And vice versa, they constitute a place's defining elements as a social context for political and other social behavior (Parkinson, 2012). This article could inspire other fields on the relationship between urban interventions and the political peace process. Now, the focus and the efforts are all concentrated on working from top to bottom, ignoring the dynamics that take place daily at city and neighborhood levels. Creating an inclusive and participatory atmosphere in public spaces encourages citizens to engage actively in the democratic life of the city, recognizing these areas as pivotal for nurturing social, psychological, and political citizenship. (Di Masso, 2015). This approach is equally imperative at the neighborhood level, emphasizing the importance of broadening these principles to local communities. Such efforts foster a sense of belonging and civic engagement that connects neighborhoods to the broader city level, ensuring a smooth transition that acknowledges diverse identities while contributing to forming a collective city identity (Acebeillo and Gracia-Bragado, 2000). People in public spaces at the neighborhood

and city level need to feel absorbed by what's happening around them—taking them to a unique dynamic where they gradually become part of it and have a memorable experience just by crossing through it. It creates opportunities for all social groups to exchange and express themselves and protect people's rights to participate appropriately in urban spaces. For this reason, urban planners and designers need to understand that public spaces evolve through the processes and practices of the time. There is a need to focus on the functions and procedures that enhance public spaces' roles (Sezer, 2020).

In addition, public spaces have a two-way effect; the value and the process of their development influence the community and the city act, and vice versa; the community's behavior and willingness for changes will impact the role of the public spaces. The public spaces also present new values in the community, which educates the people about democratic and collective action in the city's daily life (Bollens, 2006). The article explores what public spaces' functions need to be revived and rehabilitated in the case of Aleppo city, which is essential in recovering the cities experiencing war. By answering the following questions:

- What are the residents' experiences in urban public spaces before and during the war?
- How did the residents envision the urban public spaces for post-war?
- What are the residents expecting from the architects and urban planners?

The thesis questions and methodology are designed around the following hypothesis: 1) Urban public spaces can deal with physical and hidden barriers by understanding the divided communities' mental spatial maps and the conflict's history, 2) Urban planners and architects could pave the way for sustainable peace or upcoming foreseen conflict through their role in designing urban spaces.

The methodology of this article is based on implementing primary and secondary sources, Applying the theoretical background on the case study of (Aleppo City) and evaluating the pre-war and during-war urban status and their impact on fueling the war. Followed by fieldwork with residents from Aleppo to explore their different experiences in the public spaces during peace and wartime:

- Background about the case study (Aleppo city) based on the city's reports, previous studies, papers, and geographic maps.
- Information was collected using focus group discussions (FGDs) & semi structured interviews SSI tools with Aleppians, a city resident who lived there before the war.
- Annalyse the views and opinions collected using FGDs and SSI tools with previous and current residents of the city.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Public urban spaces background

Public urban spaces are important arenas for social interaction and engagement and can be crucial in shaping social relations and identities (Lofland, 1998). However, these spaces are also often contested and can become sites of conflict and violence, particularly in war and political unrest (Zukin et al., 2015). Exploring the urban spaces'

role in dealing with the city peacebuilding process based on its social dynamic concerning the conflict history and developed mental spatial maps as part of post-war reconstruction and development projects is necessary, in addition to the role of urban planners and architects in this transformation to peace. Through examining several cities globally that have grappled with divisions and have implemented diverse approaches to address them. These cities include Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, which faced ‘urbicide’ and the Dayton Agreement; Johannesburg, South Africa, navigating post-apartheid urban challenges; Nicosia, Cyprus, surmounting physical walls, though not political ones; Basque Country, Spain, transitioning from Etxea to ‘Euskal Hiria’; Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the city itself became a war spoil; and Beirut, Lebanon, which serves as a compelling case study in an indeterminate state, with its urban spaces playing a complex role in peacebuilding. (Bollens, 2012). These cities and others worldwide have navigated the intricate relationship between urban spaces and peacebuilding (Alcaraz, 2023). They offer diverse case studies that further enrich our understanding of the dynamic interplay between conflict, urban planning (Caner, 2016) and the role of architects and urban planners in shaping the post-conflict urban environment. However, this thesis selected Belfast and Barcelona as primary case studies due to their unique trajectories and pronounced impact on the peacebuilding process, making them particularly instructive for the research’s objectives (Bollens, 2012). Amidst this array of cases, the article examined Belfast/Northern Ireland and Barcelona/Spain. These cities were chosen for their unique narratives and substantial influence on peacebuilding. The Barcelona city case showed that establishing a public urban space network can promote peace and resolve conflict, where more than three hundred qualified inter-connected public spaces and facilities were created (De Balanzó and Rodríguez-Planas, 2018). For instance, urban public spaces can facilitate intergroup contact and communication, leading to greater understanding and empathy between different groups. Additionally, public spaces can serve as venues for cultural events, festivals, and celebrations that highlight the diversity of a community and promote positive intergroup relations (Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2011). Public spaces can also provide opportunities for collective action and political engagement, allowing citizens to voice their opinions and influence decision-making processes (Schattle, 2008). The reconstruction of Barcelona focused on the local urban interventions, including the public spaces, that connected the diverse areas to establish a network of democratic gathering spaces (Di Masso, 2015). It can also play an important role in peacebuilding efforts. In post-conflict situations, the reconstruction and revitalization of public spaces can serve as a symbolic gesture of rebuilding and healing. In Belfast city, the aims were to focus on the impartial areas for development and recovery to create a shared space for people to meet and interact; this helped to reduce conflict for over two decades but could not unite the city and the community (Bollens, 2001; Plöger, 2007). The public spaces can be designed in post-conflict situations to facilitate peacebuilding efforts the way they are used in Belfast city (Plöger, 2007). It argues that public space design can be essential in fostering social interaction and reconciliation among divided communities (Schafer, 2017). These spaces can also provide opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation among conflicting groups, mainly if designed and managed to promote inclusivity and accessibility.

Also, starting small at the neighborhood level (Barcelona case) is essential to practice the process with the community and showcase the benefit they got from their participation; urban equity intervention is a critical criterion for public spaces at the neighborhood level approach (El Haddad, 2017). On the other hand, public urban spaces can also become sites of conflict and violence. The case of Belfast City has shown that urban spaces can serve as venues for various forms of violence, including gang activity, drug trafficking, and terrorism. When it's not designed in a way that deals with the root causes of the war and can deal with hidden mental barriers, public spaces can also become sites of contention and struggle over resources, power, and identity (Coyles et al., 2021). For instance, using public spaces for political demonstrations, rallies, and protests can lead to confrontations and clashes between groups with opposing views. However, it is also important to note that public urban spaces can be sites of violence and conflict during war and political unrest. For example, during the Syrian Civil War, public urban spaces such as public squares and parks were targeted by both the government and opposition forces, resulting in their destruction and displacement of residents.

Role of public urban spaces in times of war and conflict, the role of urban planning in promoting peace and reconciliation in post-conflict settings. In particular, it emphasizes the need for urban planners to involve communities in the process of rebuilding and redevelopment, as well as the importance of creating public spaces that are inclusive and accessible to all (El Haddad, 2017). Furthermore, the role of public art in promoting peace and reconciliation in post-conflict settings is evident in the Belfast murals in Northern Ireland, which depict scenes of the conflict and its aftermath and have been used to promote dialogue and understanding between different communities.

Despite the potential for conflict in public urban spaces, understanding the factors contributing to peace and conflict is crucial. For instance, the design and management of public spaces can significantly impact how these spaces promote peace and facilitate conflict resolution (Madanipour, 2003). The active role of the urban planners and architects in the case of Barcelona city is prominent; they established the neighborhood-based movement association, which was essential in requesting the design of more than 200 parks, where the demands at the urban level connected to the neighborhood movement for democracy. The public space at the neighborhood level developed as part of the extensive work with the people; they defined their problems and solutions and were educated on what democracy means (Bollens, 2012).

Furthermore, social and economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion, can also contribute to tensions and conflicts in public urban spaces (Jacobs, 1961). In Belfast city, the divisions at the urban level increased, interaction areas decreased, and the number of peace walls increased. Urban demographic changes, the existence of the peace wall, as well as the empty centers and hidden barriers, emphasize the idea that designing urban public spaces is more complex and that architects and urban planners need to understand what specific functions need to be in place.

In contrast, we design or rehabilitate urban public spaces that can deal with economic, social and political aspects to ensure their role in lasting peace (Coyles et al., 2021; Bollens, 2012). In the case of Barcelona city, urban Planning translated the

economic and social program into action through 1) the process of developing and designing the urban spaces and 2) what the urban design focused on and had a priority based on the result of the participatory process. For this reason, this authority from urban design needs to be used in a way that supports the democratic transfer of the city and ensures equal opportunity and access for all groups (Bollens, 2006).

2.2. Aleppo city case study

Given the focus on urban spaces, Aleppo offers an ideal case study, reflecting a critical point for post-war reconstruction. The city's urban spaces have been a primary target during the war, signifying their relevance to the peace process and their distinct role in reflecting the broader political and economic landscape. In addition to the physical division the city experienced during the war, there was a clear line dividing the city to east and west; understanding how public spaces can foster sustainable peace or contribute to potential conflict highlights the significance of urban planning and design in shaping the city's trajectory. In this vein, the article seeks to analyze residents' experiences in Aleppo's urban public spaces, particularly during and after the war, to inform urban interventions that promote lasting peace. Moreover, the exploration of public spaces in Aleppo aims to reinvigorate and rehabilitate these spaces, contributing to the city's recovery from the impacts of war and could provide learning for other cities on how to intervene in public space rehabilitation. Through an examination of residents' experiences, this research seeks to uncover the distinct functions and expectations associated with these urban spaces, informing effective strategies for architects and urban planners.

Located in northern Syria, Aleppo is a historic city with significant urban development throughout history. Its strategic location along trade routes has been crucial in shaping its urban growth and prosperity (Kaya, 2017; Munawar, 2018). Over the centuries, Aleppo's urban fabric has evolved due to diverse influences, reflecting the contributions of various civilizations and architectural styles. Aleppo city, before the war, was the largest city in Syria, with a population of around three million and 125 neighborhoods, 22 of which are informal settlements, all of them allocated in the east of the city where 40% of the Aleppo city population lives in the informal settlement. (Almohamad et al., 2018). The social dynamics in the city have fluctuated over time due to migration, urbanization, and the current ongoing conflict (Munawar, 2018). The city has historically been home to a diverse mix of ethnic and religious communities, including Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Christians, and Muslims, contributing to its cultural richness and social fabric (Kaya, 2017). The Aleppo city council played a pioneering role, especially in the last ten years before the war. In 2003, it had its first four-year plan aligned with the country's fifth plan, which became a guiding document for the work of all administrative units. It is worth mentioning that it ensured the role of public and private organizations and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) in the city's development. In addition, the city council's role has been redefined from a service provider to a development agency (Saad and Stellmach, 2015). This redefinition allowed the council to take a proactive approach to driving positive change and implementing projects to enhance the city's infrastructure, public spaces, and overall livability (Said, 2020). From 2004–2010, the Aleppo city council developed a master plan for the city in close coordination with the Aleppo University

of Architecture. (Saad and Stellmach, 2016; Said, 2020) The master plan did not deal with class segregation between the east and the west part of the city; it dealt with them as two individual areas. In addition, the master plan did not deal with the unequal distribution of the services and did not build a connection between the city's two parts. Instead, the main character of the east part of the city is the location of the industrial area and cemeteries and vineyards spaces (Saad and Stellmach, 2016; Uberbau, 2010). In addition, the informal settlement's goal, mainly located in the east part of the city, focused on ensuring excellent and balanced services without dealing with class segregation and different opportunities related to this segregation. In keeping the division without providing interaction between the various communities (Wakely, 2009), a rapid profile was developed for those settlements to understand better settlements at the historical, social, economic, infrastructural, services and environmental levels, which is a good start. Still, it dealt with those areas away from the rest of the city, with no plans or vision to ensure the interaction at all levels between the various groups in the city. During the development of Aleppo's master plan, a new law 15 was released in 2008, targeting the informal settlement to be developed by the real-estate developers. Still, there was a discussion on the importance of developing informal settlements without demolishing the social fabric of those areas. Even as part of the city development strategy, to last for 15 years until 2025, the vision developed for the city is very ambitious and long, consisting of about 500 words, where just two lines of 27 words mention the connection between the East and west of the city.

“.....Connecting East and West and linking the city with its surrounding historical landscape, it is the social interface for all of Aleppo's citizens and contributes to their collective identity.” (Uberbau, 2010)

The conflict in Syria, which started in 2011, has inflicted severe damage on Aleppo, causing significant destruction and loss throughout the city. Aleppo has witnessed extensive damage to its infrastructure, including residential areas, public spaces, and historical sites (Dimelli and Kotsoni, 2023). The devastating impact of the war extends beyond physical damages. Aleppo has experienced significant demographic changes as a result of the conflict. The population of the city has undergone fluctuations due to displacement and migration. Many residents have been forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in safer areas within Syria or becoming refugees in neighboring countries (Munawar, 2018). The war has affected the city's diverse communities, with different religious and ethnic groups experiencing displacement, loss, and changes in their social and cultural dynamics (Eickelman, 2012). The displacement of communities and the fragmentation of neighborhoods have disrupted social cohesion and the sense of community that once characterized Aleppo (Munawar, 2018). The war has brought about significant challenges in rebuilding social networks and restoring trust between the divided communities, where the city witnessed several years of separation between its east and west.

During the war, Aleppo's political division reflected pre-existing socio-economic divides. The wealthy settled in the west, while the poor and low-income classes lived in the east and south informal areas. City master plans favored the west, neglecting the eastern and southern districts. The population in these neglected areas consisted of migrants from diverse backgrounds, including those from rural regions. Economic policies and drought led to population growth. The lack of assimilation under

economic liberalization policies made these areas fertile grounds for opposition movements.

Additionally, strong ties between rural migrants and their original areas fueled support for the opposition in these neighborhoods. These historical disparities and marginalization contributed to the alignment of eastern and southern neighborhoods with the opposition during this period (Ferrier, 2020).

Between 2012 and 2015, the city was divided into the eastern part under the control of the opposition and the free army, and the western part was under a control regime as shown in **Figure 1**. This division reflects the previous urban interventions' behaviors, which reinforced the segregation between the east and west of the city and resulted from the unequal service provisions to the eastern part of the city (Ferrier, 2020). The city's division resulted from disparities in development and resource allocation. As previously highlighted, the less-developed neighborhoods and informal settlements were situated in the city's eastern part. The significant role of urban intervention in exacerbating the conflict dynamics. The division between the eastern and western parts of the city is visually depicted in the following figure illustrates the division.

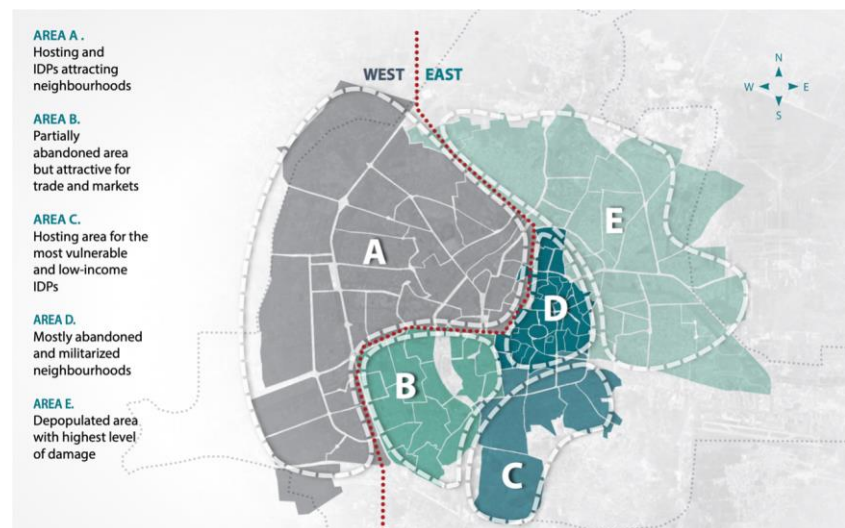


Figure 1. Neighborhood analysis for Aleppo-2014 shows the east and west divisions (Multi Sector Assessment, 2014).

The division facilitated transition points between the city's eastern and western sectors, famously called the 'Pass of Death'. Initially, this bus station was employed during direct hostilities to act as the principal crossing point for civilians moving between areas under regime and opposition control within the city (Kurgan and Merchant, 2016).

In late 2015, the regime regained control of the eastern part, and several laws and plans were developed and released as preparation for the reconstruction of the city, where almost a third of the city's population was displaced or were refugees in other countries. In addition, several real-estate developers aligned with the regime registered. The focus of the developed master plan in 2018 and the related laws 10/2018 and 23/2015 was to deal with and run the reconstruction work by closing the door of the city to just those who stayed and redistributing the resources and rights among the

actors that are aligned with the regime.

The conflict has resulted in significant demographic changes and a divided city where the urban public spaces are either hijacked by local authorities and groups in power or neglected. The city lost its public spaces, risking continued division and segregation, especially with population displacement and disruptions to its social fabric. The recovery of public spaces must address the physical, social, and economic aspects, focusing on the affected communities and dealing with the root causes and effects of the war through developing and maintaining the city fabric and connection. Through these efforts, Aleppo can begin to heal and rebuild, fostering a sense of hope and resilience for the future. Furthermore, urban public spaces should focus on social healing, community engagement, and reconciliation, which are essential for rebuilding the social fabric of Aleppo and promoting a sense of unity and resilience among its inhabitants.

3. Methodology & analysis

The method used in the article consists of a case study and fieldwork that reached 33 participants using focus group discussion and semi-structured interview tools. to explore what public spaces' functions need to be revived and rehabilitated in the case of Aleppo city, which is essential in recovering the cities experiencing war. The literature review of Aleppo City and the focus group discussion tool and semi-structured interviews allowed us to obtain detailed data that was analysed thoroughly to generate insights. By answering the following questions:

- What are the residents' experiences in urban public spaces before and during the war?
- How did the residents envision the urban public spaces for post-war?
- What are the residents expecting from the architects and urban planners?

The article questions and methodology are designed around the following hypothesis: 1) Urban public spaces can deal with physical and hidden barriers by understanding the divided communities' mental spatial maps and the conflict's history, 2) Urban planners and architects could pave the way for sustainable peace or upcoming foreseen conflict through their role in designing urban spaces.

The methodology of this article is based on implementing primary and secondary sources:

- Background about the case study (Aleppo city) based on the city's reports, previous studies, papers, and geographic maps.
- Information was collected using FGDs & SSIs tools with Aleppians, a city resident who lived there before the war.
- Annalyse the Views and opinions collected using FGDs and SSIs tools with previous and current residents of the city, where the participants' experiences firstly were categorized as negative and positive with each period, and then those experiences were analyzed by using inductive qualitative coding to find themes and patterns and gain more profound understanding of the functions where in those spaces that generated those experiences.

During the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the participants were inquired about the public places they were familiar with before and

during the war. Building upon this foundation, they delved further into their personal experiences within these public spaces. Their responses were categorized into positive and negative experiences, and the factors contributing to such perceptions were explored using inductive qualitative coding.

The fieldwork implemented four insightful focus group discussions (FGDs) and two enlightening semi-structured interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of public spaces in Aleppo City. The fieldwork gathered insights from current and former residents, technical engineers and architects, and the semi-structured interviews targeted technical from Aleppo City. Combining focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews stemmed from fostering a holistic understanding of the research context; those tools let us discern how perspectives varied based on geographic areas and contexts. Moreover, this approach facilitated the validation of information by probing similar questions from diverse angles, thereby revealing disparities and diverse experiences, engaging participants from within and outside Aleppo, representing various backgrounds and age groups.

Two focus group discussions were conducted face-to-face with current residents of Aleppo City; one was with residents from the west, and the second was with residents from the east, who provided first-hand experiences and perspectives on public spaces. The third focus group discussion was conducted with former residents who now live outside the city, providing a different perspective on the design and planning of public spaces in Aleppo City. The fourth focus group discussion was conducted with technical engineers and architects from Aleppo City who are pursuing their masters, providing valuable insights into the design and planning of public spaces in Aleppo City. In addition to the focus group discussion, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with technical who played a role in city management as part of their previous role in the city council or their participation in several projects at the city level.

Participants criteria:

The primary selection criterion for participants in this study was their status as Aleppian residents with a minimum of 15 years of experience living in the city. Additionally, participants were intentionally chosen to represent diverse backgrounds and age groups—this diversity in participant demographics aimed to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives. Furthermore, participants were carefully selected to ensure representation from various geographic areas within Aleppo, encompassing the city's eastern and western parts, as shown in **Figure 2**. This geographical diversity was a deliberate choice to incorporate insights from individuals residing in different regions of Aleppo, each of which may have unique experiences and viewpoints shaped by their specific local contexts.

Moreover, the participant criteria included individuals who are currently living in the city as well as those who were displaced during the war. This dual perspective aimed to provide insights from residents who experienced the conflict's immediate impact and those who have returned or remained, offering a multifaceted understanding of public spaces in post-conflict Aleppo.

Lastly, one of the focus groups specifically targeted academics to ensure the inclusion of an academic perspective on the role of public spaces, complementing their personal experiences. This academic perspective contributes an additional layer of

expertise to the study, enhancing the depth and richness of the data collected.

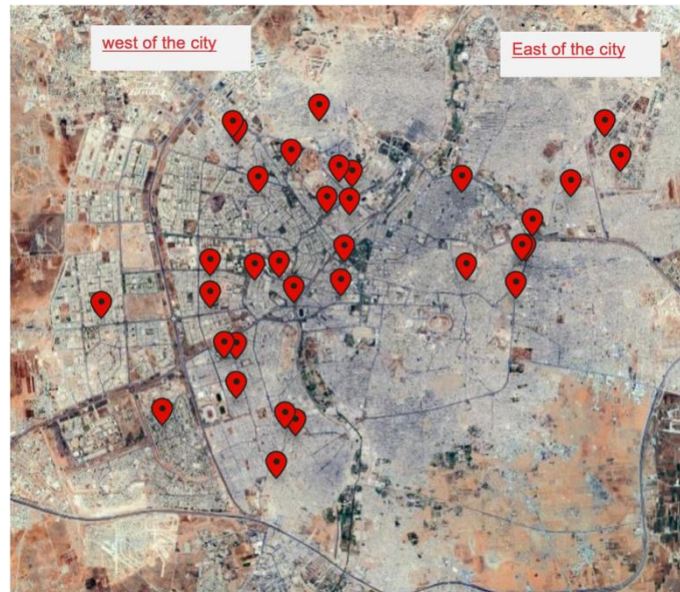


Figure 2. Participants distribution on the map (developed by the author).

Using those tools enabled us to understand the issues related to the design and planning of public spaces in Aleppo City, providing valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers, planners, and designers by prioritizing the revitalization functions of public spaces in post-war reconstruction efforts, promoting social cohesion and contributing to sustainable peace. The fieldwork used virtual and face-to-face setup, a real-time video conferencing tool to interact with the participants to conduct the online focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. Three face-to-face focus groups were implemented. The participants reached through trusted local-based organizations in Aleppo and different Syrian local networks. Invitations to potential participants were sent with clear instructions on accessing the online platform. Also, the participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study and obtained their concerns.

During the focus group discussion, open-ended questions about public spaces in Aleppo City were asked, such as their current state, usage, and challenges. Also, the participants were asked about their experiences of using public spaces in the city, their opinions on how they can be improved, and the role of public spaces in peace and war. The discussion was moderated by a trained facilitator who ensured that all participants had equal opportunities to share their thoughts and experiences.

In conclusion, the fieldwork involved reaching out to 33 participants from various backgrounds and geographic areas; 19 (57.6%) are from Aleppo City, and 45.5% are female. All participants had been residents of Aleppo City for at least ten years. **Figures 3–6** show the participants' backgrounds.

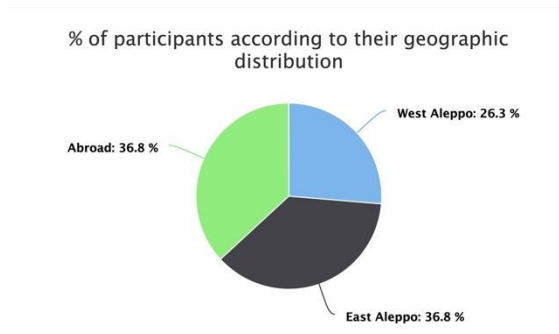


Figure 3. Participants' geographic distribution.

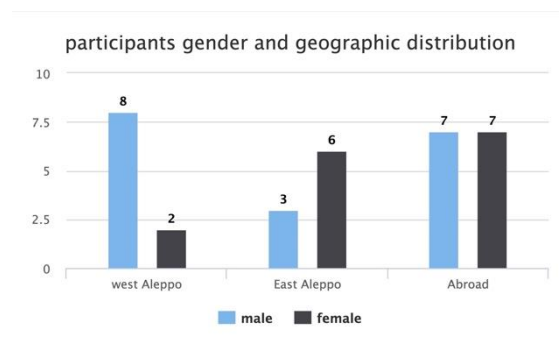


Figure 4. Participants' gender & geographic distribution.

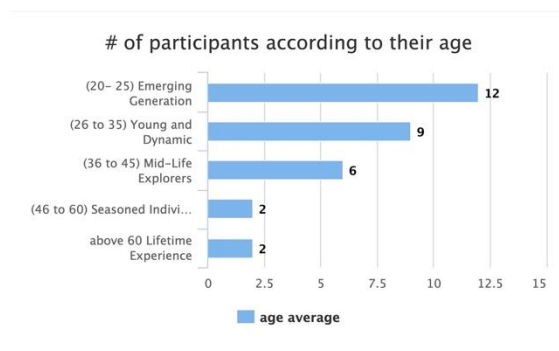


Figure 5. Participants according to their age.

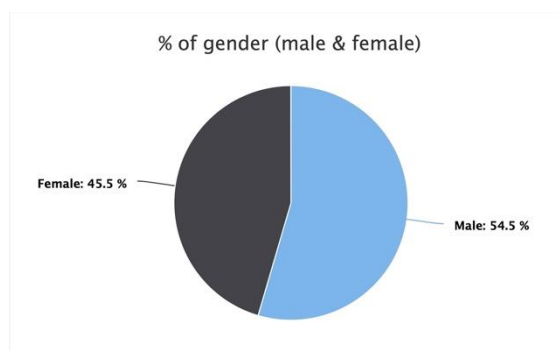


Figure 6. Participants' gender.

Based on the methodology mentioned above with the participants, a list of the public spaces from their perspective was developed and assigned to the map when we asked them about the urban public spaces they knew and visited before and during the

war; the following figures show the main categories of the mentioned public spaces from the residents' perspective and its location **Figures 7 and 8**.

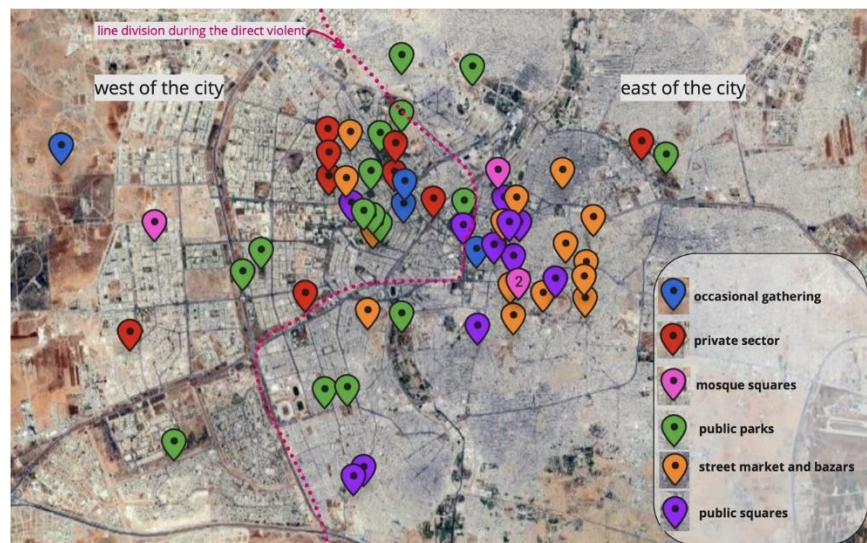


Figure 7. Type and distribution of the public spaces before the war as defined by the participants of the fieldwork (developed by the author).

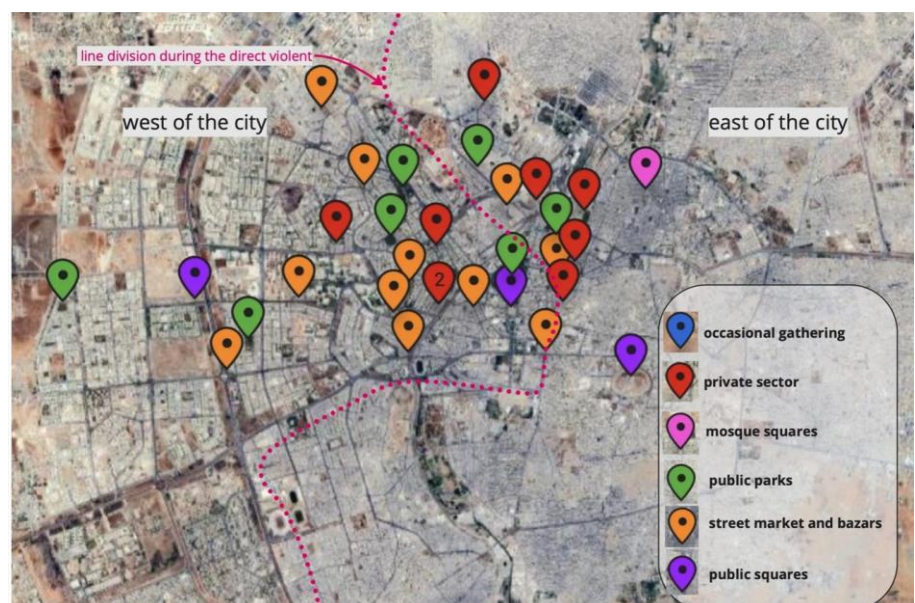


Figure 8. Type and distribution of the public spaces during the war as defined by the participants of the fieldwork (developed by the author).

The analysis of the participants' perspectives reveals a noticeable trend regarding the distribution of public spaces in Aleppo before the war. Regardless of the participants' locations, most mentioned public spaces were concentrated in the west part of the city, suggesting potential disparities in access to such amenities across different neighborhoods. Approximately 90 public spaces were identified and grouped into six main categories.

Firstly, public parks emerged as prominent spaces offering green areas for relaxation and recreation, fostering community well-being. Secondly, including private sector establishments like malls, entertainment venues, and private clubs as

public spaces highlights their role in shaping public life and facilitating social interactions. Thirdly, public squares were important as central gathering points for social, cultural, and civic activities, reflecting Aleppo's heritage. Fourthly, occasional gathering places like exhibitions, festivals, and museums contributed to the city's cultural fabric, promoting artistic expression and educational experiences. Fifthly, street markets and bazaars played a vital role as bustling commercial areas and vibrant social hubs, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds. Lastly, mosque squares held cultural and religious significance, serving as places for communal prayers, social gatherings, and community events.

The war in Aleppo significantly altered the nature and function of public spaces. Public spaces lost their role in providing safety, and the home became the only relatively safe place for many residents. Due to the ongoing conflict, public spaces receded from their traditional roles and became confined within the neighborhood. The use of building basements during shell attacks and seeking safety in lands in the countryside and mountains underscored the shift in how public spaces were utilized in West Aleppo's main streets and the small gardens related to residential areas served as the remaining accessible public spaces.

The experiences of Aleppian residents in Istanbul further highlighted the contraction and disappearance of public spaces during the war. Security authorities taking control over these spaces resulted in fear and hindered mentioning public squares and places. Some squares were remembered in the context of negative experiences, indicating the impact of the war on the perception and usage of public spaces.

From an academic point of view, the academic groups from Aleppo provided valuable insights into the effects of the war on public spaces, highlighting their shrinking and disappearance, as well as the control exerted by security authorities. The limited mention of specific main public spaces underscores the severe impact of the conflict on the city's urban fabric and the communal spaces that once played an essential role in the daily lives of its residents. The expert revealed a transformation of public spaces at the beginning of the uprising, with protests and marches occurring in these areas. However, over time, public spaces turned into security checkpoints and inspection points, reflecting the shift in how these spaces were controlled and utilized during the war.

4. Findings (also called results)

4.1. Before the war

Participants were asked about their experiences in the urban public spaces that they mentioned before the war, and they categorized them as positive and negative experiences. They shared incidents and stories, providing a better understanding of why it is considered good and bad experiences. As part of the analysis work that followed inductive qualitative coding, those experiences have been categorized under the following categories of experiences that exhibited a diverse range of emotions and reflections. Positive encounters were characterized by themes of "Family and Community Bonding," where gatherings and neighborhood interactions fostered solid familial connections. "Social Connection, Diversity, and Inclusivity" emerged as

participants described public spaces as meeting points for people from various backgrounds, promoting diversity and inclusiveness. “Recreation and Leisure” played a significant role, with modern facilities and parks providing leisure activities and relaxation spaces. Heritage sites also influenced positive encounters, instilling pride in the city’s history. However, negative experiences highlighted challenges such as safety concerns, lack of amenities, and feelings of detachment. These experiences are grouped into themes of “Safety and Security Concerns”, “Social and Cultural Barriers,” and “Limited Inclusivity and Amenities” (Figure 9). Understanding these aspects is crucial in comprehending the complexities of Aleppo’s public spaces before the war and their potential role in contributing to the Conflict. The following Figure summarizes the experiences.

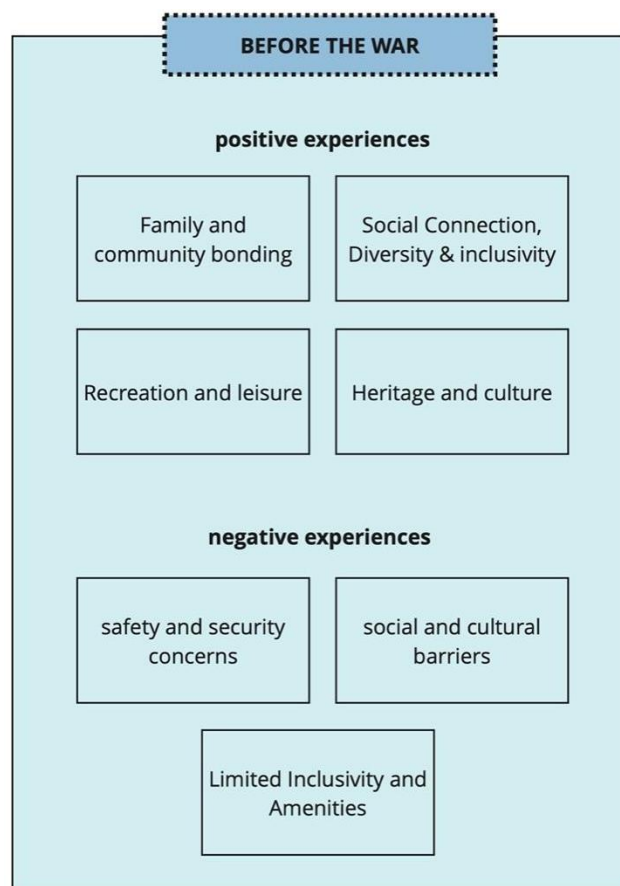


Figure 9. Experience before the war (positive and negative). The main categories (developed by the author).

- 1) Positive Experiences Before the War: The positive experiences documented in this study fall into distinct thematic categories, such as “Family and Community Bonding,” where participants expressed fond memories of gatherings with loved ones during holidays and the significance of neighborhood gatherings in fostering familial connections. Additionally, the themes of “Social Connection, Diversity, and Inclusivity” emerged as participants described public spaces as meeting points for people from various social strata, promoting diversity and encouraging inclusiveness. “Recreation and Leisure” proved to be another essential aspect of positive experiences, where modern facilities and public parks provided spaces for leisure activities, sports, and relaxation. Lastly, participants revealed how “Heritage and Culture” significantly shaped their positive

encounters, as historical sites in Istanbul reflected the local culture and heritage, fostering a sense of pride and appreciation for their city's history.

- Family and community bonding holds a special place in the hearts of participants from different parts of Aleppo. The sentiment of togetherness and community integration was evident when they reminisced about their experiences in public spaces. One participant from the western part of Aleppo City expressed,

“For me, visiting public spaces was like going to a public place with relatives and mingling with the community.”

As another participant shared, these spaces became essential for families seeking release from the crowded confines of home,

“We couldn't play at home, especially when there were many people in the house, so public spaces were places for release.”

Another participant highlighted the significance of public spaces as gathering spots during holidays:

“During holidays, we used to gather with family in public spaces.”

The importance of family and community connections extended beyond specific locations, as the interviewees of semi-structured interviews shared their experiences with neighborhood gatherings. One participant mentioned,

“The neighborhood gatherings in Aleppo were a family experience and a recreational outlet for us when we were children, where we spent some time as a family.”

These gatherings served as a comforting and familiar environment, fostering a sense of belonging for families. Public spaces in Aleppo were not just physical locations but cultural touchstones, fostering family ties and communal unity when possible.

- As for Social Connection, Diversity and inclusivity, the shared experiences shed light on the role of public spaces in fostering social connection, diversity, and inclusivity within their communities. For Aleppian based in Istanbul, private clubs like the Lawyers' Syndicate canteen and Engineers' Syndicate were recognised as

“Pleasant places with greenery and being close to residential areas considered respectable places” (Participants based in Istanbul)

Exemplifying how these spaces can serve as hubs for specific professions and contribute to social bonding within those groups, which enhances the sense of inclusivity among members. In the western part of Aleppo city, certain public spaces were dedicated to specific genders ex: just boys or men, and others who linked to school and family trips, emphasizing the significance of these areas in shaping social interactions and cultural experiences, fostering a sense of belonging for different groups. Participants from the eastern part of the city also highlighted those public spaces were:

“Easily accessible to various social strata, and it was a meeting point for the rich and the poor, not exclusive to a particular group” (Participants from the eastern part of Aleppo city).

This inclusivity showcased the positive experiences of the public spaces related to bridging socio-economic divides and creating an environment where people from

all backgrounds can interact and connect, promoting diversity and social cohesion.

Moreover, the Aleppians, based in Istanbul, shared various classes and came together in places like the university canteen, fostering dialogues and reflecting the city's diversity, creating inclusivity and understanding among different cultural and social groups. The positive experiences of the public parks in Aleppo City were highlighted as

“Open and beautiful spaces connecting different parts of the city and attracting diverse groups” (Participants based in Istanbul)

Further emphasizing their role in fostering social connections and providing a common ground for people from various neighborhoods, promoting a sense of community and interconnectedness. Meanwhile, the surroundings of the Citadel in Aleppo served as a crowded and safe space where participants always felt a sense of belonging (Participants who are academics from Aleppo), creating a positive social connection among the residents. Additionally, unclassified places like ordinary sidewalks in Aleppo transformed into public spaces during holidays, offering children's games and recreational activities, showcasing the adaptability of these spaces to meet the community's needs and promote inclusivity (Participants who are academia from Aleppo). Understanding and nurturing the positive aspects of these spaces can play a crucial role in building cohesive and harmonious communities within urban settings.

- Recreation and leisure play a significant role in shaping positive experiences in public spaces, as shared by participants. According to participants from the eastern part of Aleppo city,

“The new mall (Carrefour) was safe at night and included events suitable for all segments of society.”

Other participants highlighted the significance of the Muhallak (hanging road around the city), describing it as

“Providing a refreshing and open space.” (Participants based in Istanbul)

Additionally, they appreciated residential squares like Al-Mashhad Square, considering it a: *“respite for residents with nearby services.”* The festive atmosphere in significant squares, exemplified by the Cotton Festival in “Saadallah Al-Jabri Square”, was mentioned as *“showcasing pride in local products.”* The Olympic swimming pool and football fields were considered “beautiful spaces for youth and sports practice.” Moreover, facilities like “Bassel Al-Assad” Sports City, “Al-Zahra” Cinema were viewed as *“promoting technology, development, and recreational places.”*

Academic participants from Aleppo highlighted the attention given to the “Hamdaniyah playground” and its surrounding spaces, stating that it fosters activities like walking and offers the presence of “kiosks and services.” These positive experiences, as expressed through participants' quotes, underscore the importance of public spaces in providing opportunities for recreation, leisure, and community engagement.

- Heritage and culture breathe life into public spaces, as participants revealed through their positive experiences. Aleppian, based in Istanbul, mentioned historical sites like the Citadel, Farhat Square, and the Grand Mosque reflect

the city's rich civilisation, serving as gathering points for the community.

“Historical sites like the Citadel, Farhat Square, and the Grand Mosque hold great significance as they reflect our city's rich culture and civilisation.”

In Aleppo, fountains and a musical fountain signify the city's development, while Saif Al-Dawla Street and Al-Hatab Square become spaces for communal celebrations.

“The fountains in the public park and the musical fountain indicated the beginning of development, and they are an integral part of our cultural heritage.”

Saadallah Al-Jabri Square comes alive with activities during holidays, and the areas around Aleppo Citadel and the public garden hold special significance. These instances showcase how heritage and culture infuse public spaces with history, identity, and a sense of togetherness.

“Al-Hatab Square is a place for friends to gather, especially when eating Foull.”

Furthermore, participants reminisced about the beauty and significance of specific areas, with one individual stating,

“Old Aleppo and the surroundings of Aleppo Citadel, including the spaces between them, up to the public garden and Saadallah Square, were the most beautiful areas in the country for me.”

Heritage and culture play a pivotal role in shaping the essence of public spaces, evoking a sense of identity, pride, and belonging among individuals and communities. The positive experiences associated with historical sites, cultural elements, and traditional celebrations illustrate how these factors enrich public spaces and foster a deeper connection to the collective heritage of the cities.

2) Negative Experiences Before the War: On the other hand, the negative experiences shared by participants shed light on the challenges and obstacles that some public spaces presented. These experiences ranged from safety concerns and the absence of facilities and services to feelings of detachment and lack of belonging. These valuable insights have been categorized into three main themes: Safety and Security Concerns, Social and Cultural Barriers, and Limited Inclusivity and Amenities. By carefully examining and analyzing these negative encounters, the study aims to shed light on the factors that contributed to the less-than-ideal conditions of public spaces in Aleppo during that time. Moreover, this exploration allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how these negative experiences may have played a significant role as root causes of the Conflict. Explore these themes in detail to better grasp the challenges Aleppo's public spaces faced before the war.

- Safety and security concerns surrounding public spaces in Aleppo before the war, participants shared their harrowing experiences, highlighting the prevalent anxieties that plagued these areas. One participant revealed, “Fear of using public facilities like bathrooms.” was a significant issue, reflecting the unease and vulnerability felt within these spaces. Another lamented other shared that it is dangerous to sit in public spaces such as public gardens because that will put you in danger, especially for women

“Hesitant to sit in restaurants or cafes due to fear of harassment and stalking (public garden). (Participants from the western part of Aleppo city).”

It underscored the pervasive insecurity that hindered their enjoyment of public spaces. The perception of public gardens as unsafe for families was also prevalent,

with one individual expressing, *“Public gardens were perceived as unsafe for families,”* shedding light on the barriers that deterred families from leisure activities. The lack of inclusivity and accessibility was evident, as evidenced by the statement, *“Malls were intimidating for people with disabilities,”* indicating the need for more accommodating environments. Disturbingly, participants disclosed incidents of harassment, with one sharing exemplifying the challenges women faced while trying to enjoy public spaces.

“Harassment in public parks and dark places, like the ‘Albara’ area, was prohibited due to the presence of harassers.”

Moreover, inadequate amenities were a recurrent issue, with participants citing the *“Absence of services and even sanitary facilities in public places, like the ‘Sanaam’ area.”* Neglected areas in the city’s eastern part were perceived as hazardous, with one participant stating, *“Neglected places in the city’s eastern part, like the Bab al-Hadid roundabout, are considered unsafe and emit bad odours.”* The absence of proper lighting and facilities rendered parks scary and unwelcoming at night, leading individuals to avoid them altogether; as one participant shared, *“Scary at night after sunset, we avoid going to parks.”* Additionally, the lack of essential amenities like lighting and facilities posed problems; as another participant mentioned, *“Some problems are associated with parks due to the lack of lighting and facilities.”* Furthermore, the lack of basic facilities such as bathrooms and water faucets in public spaces proved inconvenient and detrimental to the overall experience; as participants noted, these experiences paint a vivid picture of the safety and security challenges that plagued public spaces in Aleppo before the war, and where most of the experiences shared were in the eastern part of the city.

- In the social and cultural barriers examination of public spaces in Aleppo, participants shed light on the divisive and exclusionary aspects that hindered communal cohesion. One distressing observation was using some squares for compulsory marches, such as the University Square and Saadallah Al-Jabri Square, which restricted public spaces from serving as places of leisure and gathering. Participants pointed out that certain statues in squares were perceived as symbols of embezzlement of the country’s wealth and people’s money, as exemplified by the Saadallah Al-Jabri Square statue. These symbolic representations contributed to a sense of mistrust and resentment among the population. This utilization of public squares for political or ideological demonstrations curtailed their potential as inclusive areas for community interaction.

“The squares were often used for compulsory marches, and it limited our ability to enjoy these spaces freely.” (Academician from Aleppo)

Additionally, certain squares acted as barriers between wealthy and poor neighborhoods, reinforcing feelings of oppression and discrimination. One participant expressed their concern:

“Certain squares act as barriers between wealthy neighborhoods and inferior ones.” (Aleppian based in Istanbul)

Such urban planning decisions perpetuated social stratification and hindered community integration. The issue of privatization of public squares by specific sectors and private investment further exacerbated the exclusionary nature of these spaces.

One participant shared,

“Specific sectors and private investment monopolize some public squares”
(Aleppian based in Istanbul)

Highlighting how these monopolies limited the wider community’s access to and enjoyment of public spaces. These experiences emphasize the significance of addressing social and cultural barriers in public spaces to foster inclusivity, cultural understanding, and community bonding, ultimately leading to more harmonious urban environments.

- Limited Inclusivity and Amenities in public spaces were prominent issues that affected the participants’ experiences. One participant from the eastern part of Aleppo city stated, *“There is a lack of breathing spaces in the city, and we have to go outside to find clean public places.”* Additionally, a participant from the academia in Aleppo expressed concerns about parks, saying, *“A large percentage of parks were left uncultivated and became unsafe gathering spots for young people, hindering the movement and passage of women in the area.”*

The atmosphere in public spaces was also a significant concern, with participants expressing fear and discomfort. A participant from the eastern part of Aleppo City noted,

“Unencouraging atmosphere, harassment, lack of lighting, and security guards make parks scary.”

Another participant from the same area mentioned, *“As soon as the sun sets, we have to go back home,”* highlighting the safety concerns that limited their use of public spaces during certain hours. Moreover, the lack of amenities and organized activities in public spaces was another issue raised by the participants. A participant from the academia in Aleppo expressed their disappointment, stating, *“No activities are organized in public spaces.”* This lack of organized activities contributed to a sense of detachment and disconnection from these spaces, as another participant from the western part of Aleppo city remarked,

“We did not feel attached to them, which led to neglect by people.”

These quotes exemplify the sentiments of the participants and provide valuable insights into the limited inclusivity and amenities offered in public spaces in Aleppo before the war. The issues raised shed light on potential root causes of Conflict within the community.

4.2. During the war

During the war in Aleppo, participants from different parts of the city shared their experiences, shedding light on the negative and positive aspects of public spaces during this tumultuous period. For those who still inhabited the city, their experiences were divided into two phases: during and after the direct violence stopped. Within these phases, the participants’ perceptions varied significantly, reflecting the profound impact of the Conflict on public spaces. While some noted positive changes after the direct violence subsided, others experienced ongoing challenges and safety concerns. However, for those who had left the city, the recollection of positive experiences became elusive, as the discussion of this phase opened the door for sharing their

trauma and the threatening experiences that led to their displacement. The narratives from both groups underscore the transformative power of war on public spaces and the enduring effects it leaves on individuals and communities. They shared incidents and stories, providing a better understanding of why it is considered good and bad experiences. As part of the analysis work that followed inductive qualitative coding, those experiences have been categorized under the following categories. The **Figure 10** summarises the main categories of the experiences during wartime.

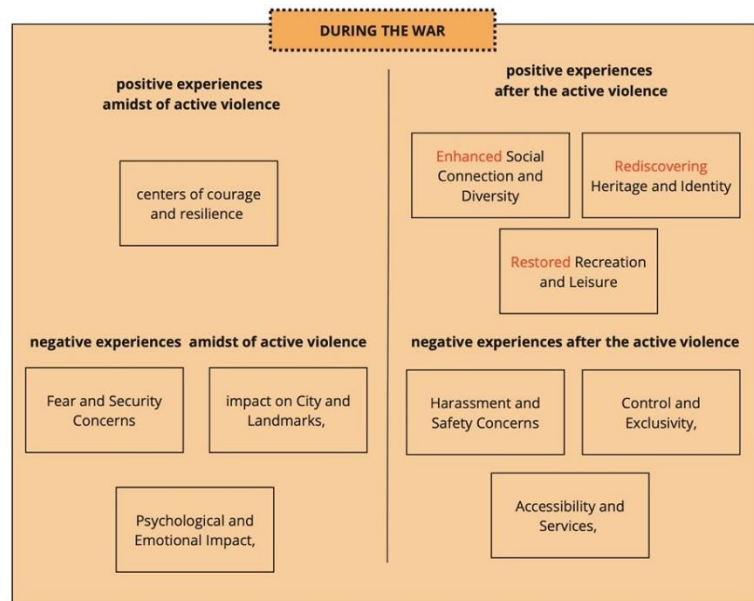


Figure 10. Experience during the war (positive and negative) The main categories (developed by the author).

- 1) Positive experiences during the war: Amidst the active violence in Aleppo, the participants faced the challenge of sharing positive experiences from the city’s public spaces. Despite the difficult circumstances, they bravely demonstrated how these spaces transformed into displacement centers and resilience during the Conflict.

“I used to participate in first aid and support affected cases when shells fell in public places.” (Participant from the western part of Aleppo city)

Each shared experience shed light on how public spaces in Aleppo transcended their physicality, becoming havens of refuge and support. In the face of war, these places played a vital role, enabling acts of compassion, providing aid and medical assistance, offering solace and escape, and serving as platforms for alternative spaces for freely expressing opinions, even under the watchful eyes of security observation.

“Some specific areas, like “Mukambo,” served as an escape from the ongoing war.” (Participant from the eastern part of Aleppo city)

“People who needed to express their opinions resorted to open places far from security observation.” (Participant who is an academic from Aleppo)

These stories underscore the profound significance of public spaces in fostering community bonds and showcasing the indomitable human spirit amidst the turmoil of war.

After the end of the direct violence, as previously mentioned, mainly those who

remained in the community to share positive experiences during the war and in the aftermath of the Conflict. These experiences can be categorized as acts of resilience and community building, showcasing the indomitable human spirit amidst the turmoil of war. Despite the hardships, the participants demonstrated how public spaces in Aleppo became beacons of hope, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity among the people. Through their stories, individuals show remarkable strength and determination to rebuild their lives and create a sense of normalcy even in adversity. These positive experiences stand as a testament to the enduring power of human connection and the ability to find rays of light in the darkest of times; the following shows the priorities areas people tried to restore despite the war and after the end of the direct violence:

- Restored Recreation and Leisure in Aleppo after the direct violence subsided has brought a sense of respite and joy to public spaces. Participants from the city's eastern part mentioned that public areas have become enjoyable again, although they still require better maintenance. Additionally, vibrant malls with a youthful atmosphere have emerged as community hubs, fostering social connections and a sense of normalcy amidst the rebuilding efforts. This restoration showcases the city's resilience and determination to create a brighter future for its residents.

"After the direct violence, public spaces have become enjoyable again, but they still need better maintenance," shared a participant from the eastern part of Aleppo city.

Another participant from the same area added, *"Some malls had a youthful atmosphere, providing a sense of leisure and fun for people in the city."*

These quotes illustrate how the restoration of recreation and leisure activities in Aleppo has positively impacted the public spaces. Despite the challenges, the city's residents have found solace in these spaces, experiencing joy and connection as they rebuild their lives and communities.

- Enhanced social connection and diversity mark a significant shift in Aleppo's public spaces following the tumultuous Conflict. Participants from the city's eastern part shared their experiences, illustrating how these spaces have evolved into more open and accessible realms, promoting social integration during the war and displacement. As one participant noted,

"They have become more open and accessible to everyone due to social integration during the war and displacement."

This transformation reflects the city's resilience and the community's determination to foster inclusivity and unity. An emphasis on inclusivity encourages individuals from diverse backgrounds to coexist and interact freely, cultivating a stronger sense of understanding and empathy among Aleppo's residents.

- Rediscovering heritage and identity have emerged as a powerful theme in the post-conflict period for participants from Aleppo. As mentioned by one of the participants who left the city and came for a short visit a few times in 2017, the citadel area became accessible, and one participant fondly shared,

"The experience was special as people from all walks of life shared the same place in the same way to visit the citadel, expressing their longing for it despite its lack of readiness and rehabilitation."

This profound connection to heritage sites demonstrates their significance in

preserving cherished memories and serving as a unifying force that transcends cultural differences, bringing people together in their shared history.

Furthermore, another participant expressed a sentiment of hope and longing, stating,

“A positive experience full of longing and a desire to rediscover the old city to discover what has happened to it.”

This collective longing to reclaim their city’s identity and understand its transformation highlights the resilience of Aleppo’s inhabitants in preserving their heritage amidst the ravages of war.

Through these experiences, Aleppo’s public spaces have evolved into robust repositories of memory and identity, symbolizing the city’s enduring spirit. As residents need to rediscover their heritage, they reaffirm their shared sense of belonging and pride, which fosters the need for a collective narrative that binds them together in their journey of healing and rebuilding.

2) Adverse experiences during the war: negative experiences mirrored the divided nature of the positive ones for those who remained in the city. Their encounters were shaped by two distinct phases: during the direct violence and after it ceased. Within these phases, participants’ perceptions varied as they endured ongoing challenges and safety concerns amid the turmoil of conflict. On the other hand, for those who had left the city, their experiences were confined to the period when direct violence still prevailed, as they could not witness the changes and developments in Aleppo after the violence ceased.

During the direct violence, participants from various backgrounds experienced various emotions and challenges related to public spaces. The conflict led to fear and security concerns, with some areas becoming inaccessible or controlled, and violent incidents in public squares. Landmarks suffered damage and deterioration, impacting the city’s overall landscape. Moreover, public spaces became associated with painful memories and triggered anxiety, leading to avoidance of those experiences categorized under the following:

- Fear and security concerns: the participants from different backgrounds shared their experiences of fear and security concerns during the conflict. In the eastern part of Aleppo City, there was a fear of leaving the house due to the presence of gangs or groups.

“Fear of leaving the house and fear of gangs or groups.” (Participant from the eastern part of Aleppo city)

In Istanbul, participants also reported feeling anxious and attempting to avoid areas with security barriers and controls. Moreover, they witnessed the suppression of individuals and the use of violence in public squares during protests, adding to their sense of insecurity.

“Suppression of individuals and the use of violence in public squares due to the repression of protests.” (Participant based in Istanbul)

- Impact on city and landmarks: the war profoundly impacted public spaces and landmarks in Aleppo. Academic participants from the city noted the shrinking of public spaces, limiting access to once-vibrant areas. The inability to access the old city and the shocking state of Saadallah Al-Jabri Square was exceptionally

significant and indicative of the war's toll on the city's landmarks and historical sites.

"Inability to access the old city. Saadallah Al-Jabri Square was a big shock."

(Participant who is an academic from Aleppo)

- Psychological and emotional impact: the war's psychological and emotional impact on the participants was evident in their experiences. Places associated with painful memories triggered negative emotions, emotionally challenging some public spaces.

"Public spaces have become a source of worry and fear." (Participant who is an academic from Aleppo)

Public spaces became a source of worry and fear, leading to avoiding such areas at the beginning of the conflict. The presence of demonstrations and the need to express opinions in open places away from security observation also contributed to the participants' psychological stress during the turbulent period.

After the direct violence, participants shared negative experiences in public spaces, including harassment and safety concerns, issues of control and exclusivity, and challenges with accessibility and services; these themes highlight the difficulties faced in utilizing public spaces after the direct violence and as part of resilience during the war as follows:

- Harassment and safety concerns: Participants from the eastern and western parts of Aleppo City shared their experiences during and after the conflict, expressing significant concerns regarding harassment and safety in public spaces. One participant from the eastern part of the city remarked, "Public places are filled with harassment," highlighting the challenging and uncomfortable environment. Another participant from the same area mentioned "Significant annoyance from beggars," shedding light on the presence of beggars in public places. Moreover, some participants noted that the fear of frequenting specific public spaces had diminished, suggesting a shift in the perception of safety. Conversely, a participant from the western part of Aleppo city shared,

"Now, going to public spaces is annoying due to the presence of a large number of beggars in public areas,"

indicating the negative impact of this issue on their experiences in public spaces. These accounts underline individuals' distressing circumstances and safety concerns while navigating public spaces amidst and after the conflict in Aleppo.

- Control and exclusivity: The experiences shared by participants from the eastern part of Aleppo city shed light on the challenges of power and exclusivity in public spaces during and after the conflict. One participant noted,

"Specific groups monopolize some public parks,"

indicating limited access to these spaces for specific individuals or communities. Additionally, another participant mentioned,

"Some spaces are controlled by certain individuals exploiting their influence,"

highlighting the issue of authority and power dynamics impacting public spaces. Moreover, the participant mentioned that.

"Activities in public squares are limited to those with security approvals,"

suggesting restricted access to specific events or gatherings. Furthermore, the

privatisation of public spaces was a concern, with one participant stating,

“Public spaces have been privatized and turned into exclusive places,”

reflecting the transformation of once-accessible areas into restricted and exclusive domains. These accounts underscore the challenges of control and exclusivity, which have influenced the dynamics and accessibility of public spaces in Aleppo.

- **Accessibility and Services:** Participants from the eastern part of Aleppo City highlighted various concerns regarding accessibility and services in public spaces during and after the conflict. One participant pointed out that public spaces were *“Difficult to access with high costs,”* indicating financial barriers that limited people’s ability to utilise these areas. Additionally, another participant mentioned, *“No nighttime lighting, a lack of proper services, and no surveillance, resulting in a lack of security,”*

underlining the safety challenges in these spaces. The earthquake’s impact was also evident, with a participant indicating inadequate infrastructure to handle emergencies.

“During the earthquake, I couldn’t seek refuge in public places because they were not adequately equipped,”

Moreover, the lack of proper health facilities and cleanliness in free public places like public gardens and the citadel was a concern for participants, reflecting the deterioration of services during the conflict. The observations on Saadallah Al-Jabri Square revealed that it was primarily used for crossing and unsuitable for leisure due to its carnival design, limiting its functionality as a public space. These experiences shed light on the issues surrounding accessibility and services, emphasizing the need for improved infrastructure and amenities to enhance public spaces’ functionality and usability.

3) Post-war key areas of focus:

As part of the fieldwork, the participants were asked about the potential role of architects and urban planners in revitalizing the urban public spaces that ensure lasting peace. They reflected on the significant role of public spaces in fostering peace and recognized the existence of hidden barriers. The participants collaboratively generated a list of critical factors essential to ensuring the positive impact of public spaces in promoting peace and facilitating post-war reconstruction in Aleppo, shedding light on the broader context of conflict transformation within the city.

The current residents of Aleppo and the Aleppians based in Istanbul share valuable perspectives on the vital role of architects and urban planners in post-war reconstruction. They focus on enhancing public spaces, promoting peace, and fostering a stronger sense of community within Aleppo. The key areas of concentration are inclusivity and safety, community engagement, preserving identity and heritage, sustainability and innovation, promoting social cohesion, activation and revitalization, financial viability, and eliminating barriers, as shown in the following **Figure 11**.



Figure 11. The key areas of concentration/resident's perspective.

The key area of concertation requested from architects and urban planners' role in post-war reconstruction, focusing on enhancing public spaces in Aleppo, can be explained as follows:

- **Inclusivity and safety:** This category emphasize the need to create public spaces that are inclusive and safe for all segments of society. It involves providing spaces that accommodate the diverse needs of children, women, and people with disabilities. Safety measures within public spaces are crucial to ensure a sense of security for visitors.
- **Community engagement:** Engaging the community throughout the planning, design, and implementation of public spaces is essential. By involving people of different age groups and fostering high community participation, architects and urban planners can create spaces that truly reflect the desires and aspirations of the local community.
- **Preserving identity and heritage:** This category highlights the significance of protecting the city's cultural heritage and identity in public space design. Incorporating educational landmarks and symbols that motivate people to make a difference is crucial in preserving the city's history and fostering a sense of pride and belonging among residents.
- **Sustainability and innovation:** Sustainable and innovative designs are essential for post-war reconstruction. Architects and urban planners can incorporate solutions for generating sustainable energy, intelligent and eco-friendly designs, and facilities to deal with environmental factors within public spaces.
- **Promoting social cohesion:** Public spaces can act as bridges that connect diverse segments of society. By designing spaces that cater to all parts of society and facilitating interaction between various groups through arts and cultural activities, architects and urban planners contribute to social cohesion and unity.
- **Activation and revitalization:** Revitalizing forgotten and small spaces as public areas is crucial to breathe new life into the city. By planning regions designated for investment within public spaces, architects and urban planners can activate these spaces and promote community engagement.
- **Financial viability:** Ensuring economic viability is vital for sustaining public spaces in the long run. Architects and urban planners can ensure these spaces' continuous maintenance and improvement by planning public spaces to be income-generating, where their revenues can cover their development expenses.
- **Eliminating barriers:** Removing physical barriers and creating open and welcoming public spaces is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and accessibility for all residents.

5. Discussion

The experiences in Aleppo's public spaces before and during the war exhibited a rich tapestry of emotions and reflections. Several themes characterised positive encounters that describe the functions of those spaces behind those experiences, each contributing to the vibrant social fabric of the city. "Family and Community Bonding" emerged as a central theme, highlighting how public spaces fostered solid familial connections and neighborhood interactions. These spaces served as hubs for social bonding, where relationships were nurtured and strengthened. "Social Connection, Diversity, and Inclusivity" was pivotal in promoting diversity and inclusiveness within the city. Public spaces served as meeting points for people from various backgrounds, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity. "Recreation and Leisure" were essential components of public life, with modern facilities and parks offering opportunities for relaxation and leisure activities. Heritage sites instilled pride in the city's rich history, connecting the present generation with its past. The intersection between positive experiences of the public spaces during the different time before and during the war demonstrates the multifaceted functions of public spaces in Aleppo and underscore their significance as sites of social interaction, cultural exchange, and recreation as shown in red in the **Figure 12**. Those functions and roles of the urban public spaces were restored once the active violence ended, despite the continued war; in addition, the role of those urban public spaces of being centers of courage and resilience evolved and was reflected in the demonstrations the people did in the public spaces and the humanitarian response that's happened during that time where the schools and the parks became a displacement center hosted people who are affected directly from the violent and create space for other people to provide support to those people.

Those are the functions of the public spaces that stand behind the positive experiences of the Aleppo city residents and are requested as part of the revitalization of the urban public spaces to maintain the functions of the urban public spaces for lasting peace as described based on the residents' experiences.

- The theme of "Social Connection, Diversity, and Inclusivity" was significant before the war and could serve as a guiding principle for post-war reconstruction. Fostering inclusivity in public spaces can promote social cohesion and reconciliation among diverse communities that may have been divided during the conflict. Efforts to create spaces where people from various backgrounds can come together may contribute to peacebuilding and long-term stability.
- "Recreation and Leisure" remained evident even during the war. This intersection highlights the resilience of human needs for relaxation and social interaction. Reconstruction efforts could prioritize the restoration of recreational facilities and parks to provide opportunities for leisure and community gatherings, contributing to the overall well-being of residents.
- Heritage sites instilling pride in the city's history were relevant before and during the war. Preserving and restoring heritage sites can play a dual role in post-war reconstruction. It can contribute to a sense of identity and pride among the local population while also attracting tourism and investment, which can be vital for economic recovery.

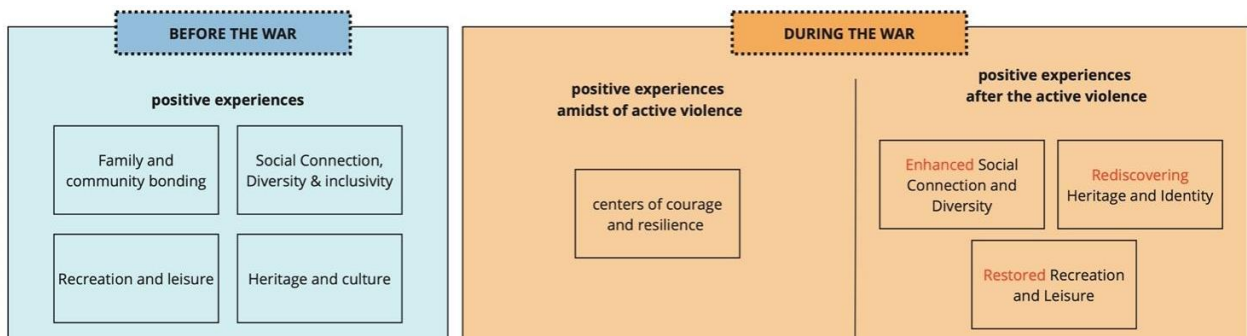


Figure 12. Functions that stand behind the positive experiences along different times before and during the war from fieldwork participants’ perspectives.

However, not all experiences were positive. Negative encounters underscored significant challenges before and during the war. For example, “Safety and Security Concerns” were a prevailing issue, with some participants expressing unease and apprehension while using public spaces before the war and extended with broader implications during the war with different forms amidst the direct violence and after the end of the explicit violence. “Social and Cultural Barriers” highlighted instances where the inclusivity of public spaces was compromised, reflecting the need for greater social cohesion and the “Limited Inclusivity and Amenities” also emerged as a concern, suggesting the need for improved infrastructure and services to enhance the overall quality of public spaces which lead to “control and exclusivity” during the war, recognizing and addressing “Social and Cultural Barriers” that hindered inclusivity in public spaces during both periods is crucial.

In addition to the Limited Inclusivity and Amenities, the persistent issue of “Limited Inclusivity and Amenities” led to a broader lack of accessibility and services.

In addition to the inherited issues before the war that led to a broader impact on the urban public spaces, two other roles have been raised, which are the impact of the war on the city landmarks and identity and the psychological and emotional role of the public spaces, especially for those who had left the city, sharing “positive experiences” in public spaces became elusive **Figure 13**. This phase opened the door for participants to share their trauma and experiences in the public urban spaces in the city. These narratives underscore the devastating effects of war on individuals and communities and highlight the important role of urban public spaces in understanding the long-term psychological and social impacts of conflict.

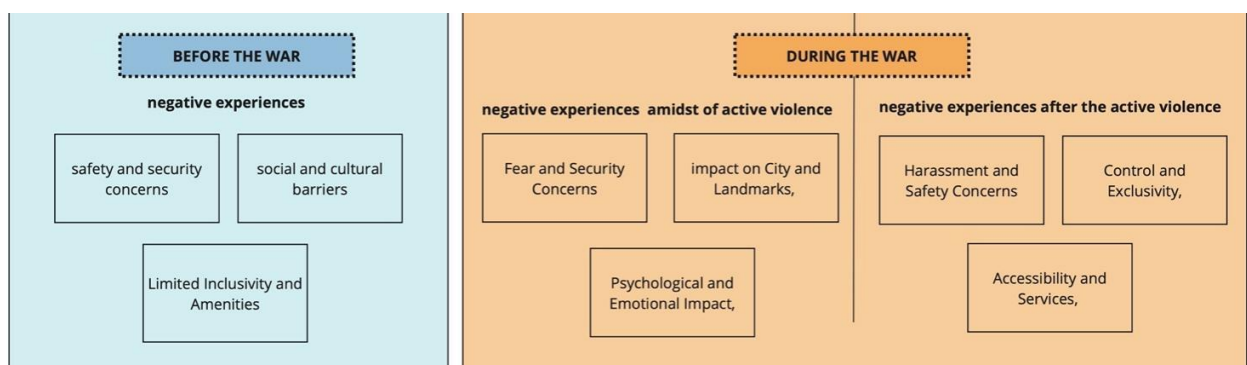


Figure 13. Functions that stand behind the negative experiences along different times before and during the war from fieldwork participants’ perspectives.

The figure below shows the negative experiences before and during wartime.

These roles and issues are closely tied to the pre-war characteristics and conditions of public spaces, which, in turn, play a crucial role in shaping their transformative trajectory during wartime. The experiences shared by participants demonstrate how the history and nature of public spaces lay the groundwork for their adaptation and resilience amidst the challenges posed by war. The impact of the conflict on these spaces is intertwined with their pre-war significance, reflecting the indomitable human spirit that persists even in the face of adversity, as we saw the restored roles and functions of the public urban spaces based on the participants' positive experiences underscoring how the qualities of public spaces before the war continued to shape and influence their evolution throughout the conflict. It was evident as a space of courageous role amidst the direct conflict and preserving city landmarks and identity in addition to the psychological role.

Indeed, identifying intersections between the experiences of public spaces before and during the war can yield valuable insights for future programs and post-war reconstruction efforts through the functions mentioned earlier. Adding to them the areas of focus of post-war urban public spaces, as listed by the participants from the residents' perspective, could provide a road map on what is expected from architects, urban planners and decision-makers to ensure those functions. These intersections can help inform strategies to rebuild and revitalize public spaces in conflict-affected areas.

As we can see in the figure above about the key areas of concentration, those functions should ensure a process and pre-condition as part of the urban public spaces post-war revitalization, which the participants believe that architects and urban planners should consider as part of their role, which emphasizes the functions and the roles of the urban public spaces that represent the positive experiences and able to ensure the new role of the urban public spaces that able to deal with the negative experiences of the participants.

Identifying these intersections between pre-war and wartime experiences and what is from architects and urban planners could offer a roadmap for rebuilding public spaces that are not only functional but also socially and culturally relevant. Future programs and post-war reconstruction initiatives can draw from these intersections to create inclusive, resilient, and vibrant public spaces, contributing to conflict-affected communities' healing, reconciliation, and long-term stability.

6. Conclusion

The key findings in the study reveal various positive and negative experiences associated with Aleppo's public spaces, both before and during the war. These experiences shed light on these spaces' multifaceted roles in shaping the city's social fabric, cultural identity, and psychological role during challenging times. Notably, the positive encounters emphasized the significance of public spaces as vital hubs for family and community bonding, promoting social connection, diversity, and inclusivity, and serving as recreation and leisure centers. Heritage sites instilled pride in the city's history, connecting past generations with the present. These positive functions of public spaces emerged as crucial elements for fostering lasting peace and addressing the community's diverse needs.

Conversely, the study identified several challenges that hindered the inclusive and accessible nature of public spaces. Safety and security concerns, social and cultural barriers, and limited inclusivity and amenities were highlighted as key issues that impacted the quality and accessibility of these spaces, particularly during the war. Moreover, the study underscored the pivotal role of public spaces in addressing individuals' and communities' psychological and emotional needs, showcasing their potential for healing and resilience.

The research emphasizes the vital link between the pre-war characteristics of public spaces and their adaptive capabilities during wartime. Despite the challenges posed by the conflict, the study reveals these spaces' resilience and transformative potential, underlining their crucial role in shaping community dynamics and preserving cultural identity. The study offers valuable recommendations for architects and urban planners, emphasizing the need to prioritize revitalising public spaces in post-war reconstruction efforts. By considering the multifaceted functions and roles of urban public spaces, these professionals can contribute to creating inclusive, resilient, and culturally relevant spaces that support conflict-affected communities' healing and long-term stability.

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