
Rethinking cultural infrastructures in post-Assad Syria: a forum

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From 16 to 17 September 2025, global dis:connect hosted our first forum. The forum is a new format for gd:c to explore how support for the arts can be rethought in countries and regions undergoing major transitions. The arts are subject to the same forces of globalisation as other areas of cultural and social life. They are highly diverse and at the same time often remarkably similar on an institutional level. Art fairs, theatre, film and music festivals, as well as iconic architecture for their presentation can be encountered

Fig. 01
The forum as a new format for gd:c

around the globe. Yet their status and forms of delivery vary in the extreme, especially in countries and regions marked by ‘turbulence’.¹

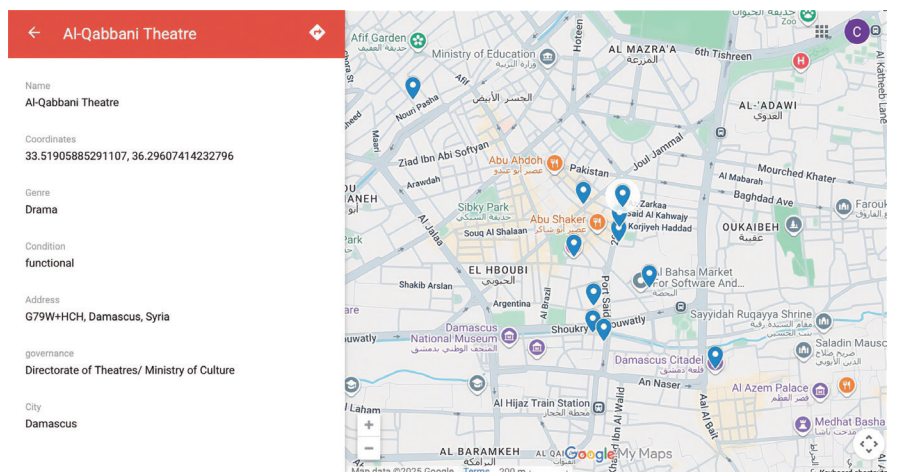
Our forums address a set of recurrent questions. Who do these institutions serve? Do they justify their funding? Do they even receive public funding, or are they dependent on the vagaries of private philanthropy and sponsorship? Are they subject to direct political influence, or do they operate ‘at arms’ length? Are arts institutions required to respond to touristic-heritage demands rather than artistic imperatives? How are local and national activities embedded in wider regional networks?

We devoted the first forum to post-Assad Syria as a reaction to the events of December 2024, which saw the fall of the Assad regime and the takeover by a former jihadist group led by Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa. Once the most important cultural centre in the region, years of war and mass emigration have left the cultural landscape of Syria in disarray. The workshop gathered artists, directors of funding bodies and curators from Syria and neighbouring countries to rethink how cultural infrastructure might be reconceived going forward. The challenges facing cultural infrastructure globally pose themselves in Syria in extremis, as much material infrastructure has been destroyed and the former structures of a largely state-controlled arts scene no longer function.

The conditions in Syria drove us to pose many questions in the discussion. What remains of existing cultural infrastructure – both material and immaterial – and what new forms can still be imagined and built? What possibilities and promises can emerge from these shifting landscapes? Which networks can be activated or reconfigured, and how might the region’s cultural life position itself within broader regional and global artistic ecologies, particularly in relation to questions of alliances, dependencies and hierarchies in the arts?

Christopher Balme; Sophie Eisenried, gd:c’s curator responsible for our cooperation with the arts; and Dr. Ziad Adwan, a Berlin-based Syrian dramatist, researcher and former lecturer at the Syria’s Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, organised the event. With Adwan’s help, we assembled a group of largely Syrian participants, all of whom work outside the country: Abdallah Al-Kafri (Syria/Lebanon), Raed Assfour (Jordan), Hala Khayat (Syria/Dubai), Hadeel Abdelhameed (Australia/Iraq), Helena Nassif (Lebanon), Junaid Sareddeen (Lebanon) and Alma Salem (Syria/Canada). Anne Eberhard (Goethe Institute, Beirut) and the Syrian director and dramaturge, Rania Mleghi (Munich), joined us on the second day.

1 Milena Dragičević Šešić and Sanjin Dragičević, *Arts management in turbulent times: Adaptable Quality Management: navigating the arts through the winds of change*, trans. Vladimir Ivir, ed. Esther Banev and Francis Garcia (Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation & Boekmanstudies, 2005).



Planning began in early 2025 with the circulation of a concept paper outlining the idea of the forum and how we understand the term *cultural infrastructure*. We distinguish between three different forms:

- **material:** buildings, venues, spaces, heritage sites;
- **immaterial** or intangible: the cultural capital of artists and creatives; their networks; sources of funding; and
- **institutional:** mainly cultural organisations, which in post-socialist societies such as Baathist Syria are/were still largely state-funded. In liberal democracies they are augmented by different kinds of commercial and non-profit organisations.

There are many ways to study infrastructure, which has become an expanding area of interdisciplinary research. It is important to remember that infrastructure is not just purely functional but also has a rhetorical use, what the anthropologist Brian Larkin terms the ‘poetics of infrastructure’² and Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, have called the ‘promise of infrastructure’.³

A second stage of preparation involved mapping existing infrastructure in Syria using Google Maps. Such maps are commonplace, and many cities develop them as online resources. In the UK, the West Midlands Combined Authority, the Greater London Authority, and even local councils such as Milton Keynes provide them. Further afield, cultural infrastructure plans have also been developed in cities such as Sydney, Vancouver and Amsterdam. While such cities produce such maps for diverse reasons, ranging from self-promotion to a genuine need to inform their citizens, the situation in Syria meant it was a largely remedial and reparative exercise. After ten years of war, the question was: what still existed and in what state of

2 Brian Larkin, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013).
3 Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel, ‘Introduction: Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure’, in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

Fig. 02
A section of the cultural infrastructure map, which can be accessed at tinyurl.com/bknpp38e.

repair? Our criteria indicated not just name and location but also functionality, genre and governance (figure 2).

The workshop ran over two days and combined plenary sessions and breakout groups. The opening session took the map as a point of departure for an extended discussion of what cultural infrastructure entails in a postwar and post-socialist situation.

The workshop was overshadowed by recent events, namely massacres of civilians: Alawites in Latarkia and Bedouin and Druse minorities in Sweida. These events, plus the continuing war in Gaza, influenced the atmosphere of discussions. The optimism of early 2025 had given way to uncertainty and even pessimism, not only about the political future of the country but also whether the arts, broadly understood, would have a place in a regime controlled by a government with roots in jihadism.

An initial round of discussions opened a set of topics that would recur over the two days. For example, Helena Nassif asked what values can the arts defend, what meta-narratives do we want to construct? Alma Salem wondered how the arts can be embedded in the ongoing political discussions regarding the constitution, elections, and justice, especially when there is already evidence of individual freedoms being denied.

Hadeel Abdelhameed pointed to the example of Iraq, which had undergone similar levels of destruction and internecine violence. Now, however, cultural venues and their spatial memories have gained importance, as evidenced in the renovation of Iraqi buildings in last two years, such as the city of Ur.

Abdallah Al-Kafri emphasised the importance of peer organisations in the region while acknowledging that philanthropy and donations had become more complicated with the welfare state in crisis. Currently, there are huge distractions and divisions amongst NGOs in the field of culture.

For Junaid Sareddeen, director, dramaturge and founding member of the Beirut-based Zoukak Theatre Company, a key aim must be to sustain the region's cultural and religious diversity, which often figures as its weakness because of its potential for dissension. That can/should, however, be used as an advantage. Syria has, as he put it, a 'super local economy', created by over a decade of war. Co-convenor Ziad Adwan argued that this element of locality meant that, in the transition phase at least, one should think in terms of pop-up or recurrent festivals rather than extended seasons. The cultural-infrastructure map could be used to identify venues. Raed Assfour, director of the Jordan-based Al-Balad Theatre, a multi-purpose cultural centre, emphasised the need to support regional movements.

In three breakout sessions, smaller groups focused on specific topics: alternative venues and training models, national

vs. regional curating and models of support beyond state/public institutions. In the latter, for example, the role of NGOs, international funders and philanthropic foundations was discussed. While the traditional supporters, such as the European cultural institutes (British Council, Goethe Institute, Institut français etc.) certainly played a part in supporting local activities by, for example, creating safe spaces for performances and exhibitions outside state control, their financial contribution was relatively modest. Perhaps the most successful example of collaboration between locals and outsiders is in the field of archaeology, which can draw on exceptionally long-lasting partnerships going back decades. Participants emphasised the wide range of non-state and non-public funding. Apart from international philanthropy such as the Ford Foundation and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), which have a long history of supporting the arts, one should also remember that support can come from numerous sources, corporate as well as private families and their foundations. Oil companies have funded art books, churches have supported choral singing, and amateur traditions such as ancient Syrian chants, a Christian singing tradition going back many centuries with claims to the status of a immaterial cultural heritage.

The Beirut Museum of Art (BeMA), currently under construction, exemplifies the complex networks of support that extend beyond Lebanon and include UNESCO, the Washington-based Middle East Institute and the Getty Foundation. The Arab Theatre Training Centre (ATTC) based in Lebanon (executive director Raed Assfour) has received long-term support from SIDA, as well as other funding organisations such as the Swiss Agency for Development & Co-operation (SDC) in Jordan and the Anna Lindh Foundation. NGO funding is extremely complex, and there is too little research into the wider field of non-state funding.

The second day opened with a plenary paper by Anne Eberhard, current director of the Goethe-Institut (GI) in Beirut and responsible for re-opening the GI in Damascus. The closure of the institute in 2012 due to the war had been countered to some extent by the Damascus in Exile programme, which involved many artists from the Syrian diaspora, especially those based in Berlin. Eberhard outlined current activities and the difficulties in restarting support for artists in Syria, such as a new cultural project fund. Its implementation is still hampered by bureaucratic barriers, such as the difficulties in transferring funds to Syria, which is still not possible. The challenge is to rebuild the networks in Syria. In March 2025, a delegation led by the German Federal Foreign Office that included members from the Goethe-Institut, the German Archaeological Institute, the German Academic Exchange Service and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation visited the country during a period of optimism. Though the desire to reopen remains, the Goethe Institut is beholden to directives of the Federal Foreign Office.

The plenary sessions on second day were connected by the idea of ‘strengthening networks’ and looked at ‘community-based production’, ‘inter-city connections’, and ‘diasporic perspectives’. Community-based production belongs to the positively connoted terms, sometimes associated with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of ‘community-building’, that circulate in the NGO world.⁴ In a wide-ranging discussion participants interrogated both the term itself (‘how to translate the NGO term *community* into Arabic or other languages’) and its application, as for example when the Syrian government began implementing ‘community projects’ under the patronage of the First Lady, Asma Fawaz al-Assad, in the early 2000s. A positive example was the Lebanon-based theatre group Zoukak, which initiated drama therapy workshops in refugee camps during the 2006 war with Israel. A recurrent critique targeted the equation of ‘community’ with ‘village’ or similar traditional forms of organisation. Helena Nassif proposed redefining the term to mean ‘working with groups in a context’, which also include artist collectives and various kinds of humanitarian actions.

The topic of strengthening networks through intercity connections addressed a series of questions including whether artists in the region’s main cities form a shared community and how these ties might be strengthened. Another question revolved around competition vs. collaboration: when do inter-city cultural initiatives risk competing for the same limited funds instead of complementing each other? The importance of hub cities was also discussed, referring in this case Beirut and formerly Damascus. How can the latter regain that function? The current situation sees numerous smaller networks and a productive path might be to form coalitions to encourage them to come together.

The importance of diasporic networks for rebuilding cultural infrastructure in new Syria is unquestioned, but discussion focussed on the extent to which diasporic voices can legitimately speak for a future Syrian context and whether the current conditions even permit a large-scale return of exiled artists. On the other hand, diasporic institutions (festivals, galleries, archives) could serve as ‘extended infrastructure’ for Syria. There was consensus that future planning must include diasporic artists because of the sheer numbers involved. As the participants all belong in one way or another to the diasporic network, although it is not formally organised as such, everyone was ready to contribute to strengthening immaterial infrastructure – such as knowledge transfer, networks and funding models.

The final section of the workshop was an open mic and provided the opportunity for all participants to formulate plans and

4 Hossein Mousazadeh, ‘Unraveling the Nexus between Community Development and Sustainable Development Goals: A Comprehensive Mapping’, *Community Development* 56, no. 2 (2024) doi:10.1080/15575330.2024.2388097.

ideas for the future of the region, under the current or even a new government. Contributions ranged widely over deeply felt expressions of pain and loss over what has happened in the ‘cradle of civilisation’ formulated by Helena Nassif. It will be necessary to create for Syria, she argued, ‘a new sociality’ after the decades of oppression and war. Ziad Adwan asked: ‘what are my extensions today as a theatre maker towards Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians?’, thus positioning his artistic activity very much in a regional context. He wondered also how to evaluate the mapping project as well as how to record the deliberations of the forum itself (there is no audio or video recording). Perhaps one could think of a medium-term research project. Alma Salem stressed the need to reframe the region away from purely geopolitical arguments to geocultural ones to create more positive, constructive narratives. The regionalisation discussed in the workshop is not an objective to be achieved but is an already existing organic reality.

The workshop was a short but intensive interaction bringing together theatre directors, curators, actors, cultural policy makers who were either Syrian or had strong ties to the country. Most described themselves either as expatriates or in exile. All were dedicated to re-establishing the once-vibrant arts scene in Syria, particularly Damascus, but also in other cities such as Aleppo. It was clear at the end of the two days that the forum format had initiated intensive discussions, renewed ties and laid the foundation for further initiatives. Much will depend on the stabilisation of an extremely fragile political situation and whether the current ‘transitional’ government can reconcile its Islamist orientation with the freedom of expression necessary for artistic culture to be re-established.

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