Transcript
Culture in Crisis – Preservation by Design
Episode 1 – The Architectural Impact of cities: Social Cohesion and Crisis in Syria

Lyse Doucet: Hello, and welcome, I'm Lyse Doucet, the BBC's chief international correspondent, and I'm joined today here in London by Marwa al-Sabouni, she's an architect from Syria's third largest city, Homs, and she's also the author of the acclaimed book, 'The Battle For Home - The Memoire of a Syrian Architect'. Marwa, welcome to London, it's great to see you here.

Marwa Al-Sabouni: Great to see you, thank you.

LD: Let's begin with a central, and indeed an urgent question, can architecture really play a role in mending your country so torn apart by war?

MAS: I think architecture proved that it can, through many experiences over the world, either after World War I or II, or in a civil war context, it proved that it can heal and proved it can also enhance and never end the cycle of violence.

LD: And in the same way, you believe and you argue in your book that Syria's urban architecture also played a part in fuelling this war which has left so much of Syria in ruins and shredded its social fabric.

MAS: Yeah, that's exactly right, because the segregation mode by our urban development has confined people into ghettoised areas and people from those areas, you could notice from the conflict pattern, how people from those areas were very alienated from others and also very alienated from a sense of place, or sense of belonging, which I compare in 'The Battle For Home' with the old cities that we used to have where people from the same mix or the same different background have actually found a social code or a mode of peace to live together. And to link that with built environment was very self-evident because as I said not only the configuration of the place and location of the place, but also if you went on a micro level and on an architectural level as well, you could see the size of property, the shape of details, the scale, the proportions, the street feeling, all of these factors played a role in shaping and perpetuating patterns and modes of living between people - among people.

LD: Well your book is both an exploration of that past and also the outline of a vision for a different kind of a future, and we're going to explore those ideas in a moment, but it's also a personal memoir how you, your two young children, Naya and Ayk, and your husband and fellow architect, Ghassan Jansiz, I have to tell our listeners that a big smile has come across your face, you're missing them here in London. How did you survive the war in Homs? Homs saw some of the first and some of the worst of the fighting, did the danger come right to your door?

MAS: Yeah, it literally came to the door because we had experienced all the atrocities that happened in this war, whether kidnaps, snipers, mortars, stray bullets, battling. I'm
afraid every single danger has passed either our window or our doorsteps. But yes, we survived, this is the good news, we survived.

LD: Paint a little picture for us. I was with you recently in Homs and I looked out your window and you showed me where the tanks were, where the snipers were, paint us a picture here today about what it actually looked like from your window.

MAS: During the war?

LD: Yes.

MAS: I mean, there were several periods of times, several stages, if you like, we had the-, when the uprising came and the clashes in the street fighting, then when each warring faction had its own-, defined the territory, you could say. We fell on the battle line between the two and that's when-, where it got uh-, were caught uh-, caught up in the middle. So snipers would-, would be holding the narrow streets that connected to our main street and also the mortar game, if you like to say, also landed around our blocks and in the street where we lived. And the tank used to position itself at the end of our street to shoot, as I said, it was a battle line, so, yeah, you could imagine the-, the cross fire.

LD: And imagine your children walking to school.

MAS: Yeah

LD: Young children - that risky journey.

MAS: The school was in the stage of snipers and mortars because those lasted for-, I mean, the tanks could last for few months and happened to be, I guess in the summer, so when the school was taking place, the school days taking place were at times where the mortars were landing. So everybody, not only my children, those who open their shops, those who went to their daily businesses, those who were bringing up their groceries and also the parents who were taking their children to the nearest school, because each neighbourhood kept itself confined and not risking to go from place to place, so you keep-, k-, keep yourself within two or three streets, but those streets also were very dangerous because you don't know what to-, what would land over your head, the sky is open and anything could land. And it actually landed several times, but luckily o-, luckily for us but unfortunately for the others, we were-, we were already at our place, but any moment it could be-, I mean, any moment it can happen, we just raced through-, through the streets to make it.

LD: And the architecture studio that you and your husband shared, it was destroyed, what happened?

MAS: Yeah, because it was in the old city then-, at the main square really, and the building was completely burnt out and nothing left-, nothing. But the-, the shell structure is still standing but every-, everything from inside is just ruined.

LD: Millions of Syrians fled the violence, you and your family decided to stay, why?

MAS: I get asked this question, I guess, every time, and I-, frankly, I think it was the most obvious choice for us because, um if you-, if you manage to get over the initial impulse, the panic that could take over you, if you manage to get across this and have a moment of rational thinking, you would see that this is the most rational thing to do if-, if-, in terms of risk, you may risk yourself more if you took a journey let’s say in the sea or through the fire or whatever. And if you are thinking about the future, you also-
you could-, you could waste your future seeking that future. So it was, at the beginning, a very rational plan, but it evolved into an emotional thing that attaches to our place and really connected us to a place we are able now to call home.

LD: Well indeed the book title is, 'The Battle for Home', how would you describe your concept of home?

MAS: I mean, as I said, the first thing a home should offer to you is belonging - a sense of belonging. And I think to reach this sense of belonging is a process that-, that in my book I try to make the case that it-, it begins with the built environment, it begins with kind of people you meet, what kind of business or work you could accomplish, what kind of place could embrace you rather than encapsulate you. And it's funny, or strange, to find this place in a destroyed place rather than the built one before, because, I guess, destruction although it's a very desperate scenario, but it has the seeds of hope that something could change, something could offer you a way out of the stuck situation you were living in. And I'm not speaking about a political situation, I'm speaking about a blocked horizon that was facing many young people like us back in the days when the war started. We faced in a very stuck end, where to go, where to live, what to do for work, what kind of future you have in front of you, and I guess my thinking or my case that I'm trying to raise in the book that it starts by built environment and the shape of built environment.

LD: As you know so well, millions of Syrians have lost their homes, they're utterly destroyed, or they lie badly damaged, and now that the battle in the major cities is over, they're largely back in government hands, people are talking about reconstruction or a lot of people use a less politically sensitive word, they talk about rebuilding; is this the time now to start thinking about that?

MAS: It's already the time, I mean we should've thought about rebuilding since the beginning, but I guess it could be unpractical to think very beforehand, because you don't know what kind of situation you would have. I don't think, thinking of, let's say, precise projects would be practical to think of before peace, but visions should be set in order to find peace. And this is where it's right to raise awareness of, especially in my country through the book, that we need to think about which kind of city, which kind of village as well, which kind of countryside we need to have in Syria, in order to be able to rebuild it in the right way. And frankly the news that is leaking out of reconstruction and rebuilding is not very promising in that regard because they, you know, they are promising of how fast they could deliver and how much profit they can give and they don't think what kind of impact those places would have on people and I think people would be very reluctant to come back and be engaged if they couldn't find a more plausible cause than just a place that could offer jobs.

LD: Do you think it might go back to what it was most recently, which, as you described in your book about the soulless tower blocks and the demographic ghettos, you know, Christians live in one area, Muslims in another. What do you hear now?

MAS: This is exactly what I’m hearing now and what is presented as a potential future and this is very-, I mean, this is very worrying, because we should take the moment and break the cycle, otherwise we will just only have to look few kilometres to the west,
to Lebanon, and see what kind of future you could have in a civil war context if you rebuilt on the same modes that you were embracing and lead to that actual war.

LD: Because they rebuilt large sways of Beirut, they tried, they said to respect local architecture and heritage, it was all done at great cost and-

MAS: They know that they didn't respect, they tried to preserve and they tried to make preservation a business model, meaning that they-, they tore apart certain elements and reapplied those elements as a facade for luxurious businesses behind, and it stood vacant as a heartless city, without any core and all the remaining people were few in the centre and they also were pushed to the outskirts and even pushed further - to the immigration countries.

LD: You argue in your book that Syria has, in its own history, a possible better answer to the future, and we saw that when we walked together through the old city, much of it lies in ruins, but now all of it. And layer upon layer of different eras of Syria's history in different architectural areas, where'd you have 2000 year old columns and 200 hundred year old city walls, bring us back to that past to explore what Syria should draw upon to build this new future.

MAS: I think starting from the layering approach is a very smart way of reusing what is already existing. And the way that was implemented is a very careful and sensible way, which has always been, I mean, aesthetically aware, and also functionally aware, which is the core of architecture implemented in a very sensible and beautiful way,

LD: Use an example.

MAS: I'll give you an example, I mean, the part of Homs that we wandered in, the suq where several-

LD: The market.

MAS: Yeah, the market, which is the old market, where several amenities like the public baths, the mosques, the churches, the shops, even the linked in housing, but also private and protected housing, so I mean, this suq was a productive public space, a hub for people to come and meet and also to work. And if you compared it, as I said, to the failing example in Beirut for example, so called preservation of the suq was basically turning the suq into a mall but just keeping the walls and keeping some elements. The story is different in the layering approach, where the building materials were a start, the craftsmanship was preserved and included in the rebuilding process, it doesn't have to be-, and I'm not in favour in-, in just freezing the past, but this is actually the dynamic of building on heritage, using what already existed and drawing on what made it beautiful, what made it so functional, what made it so sustainable, and build upon this, yeah, I guess this is the main core of what made it work.

LD: And for you this is as much a part of what we now refer to as heritage, as the Roman ruins of Palmyra are, the ancient city walls, the monuments, the statues, the way people live their everyday lives.

MAS: Exactly, Palmyra is a very good example because people of Palmyra couldn’t belong, couldn’t relate themselves to the location of Palmyra, specifically because Palmyra was detached from them, was freestanding and was channelled into becoming only a tourist destination where the profit of this destination goes into the pockets of few people. The people of Palmyra were detached from the location and lived in a very
modest-, not modest, some-, it's not-, in human context, and the way to do it is to look
at the old cites, how this was connected into the lives of the people where they can
profit from it, be part of it, work around it and live inside it basically.

LD: But you worry that because so much has been lost, as you know, you drive through
entire neighbourhoods, you can drive through miles and miles and miles, hardly a
building left standing, and this will cost so much, it will take so much time, the race
will mean that they will just want to build places for people to live.

MAS: Yeah, there are two scenarios and as you know, my husband has a different view from
mine in that particular regard, because he thinks that maybe we should rebuild
another city next to the city, but I’m in favour of, of keeping the memory - not the
memory of war, but I think if I was displaced or uprooted from my place and I wanted
to come back, I would very much want to go back to a similar context to something to
remind me of-, images, or life, life that I had before. And with the massive destruction,
it’s very tricky and challenging thing to do, surely there are places that must be raised
because they are incapable of standing, and they were already badly planned buildings
as they were. But I think this is where planning and architecture can step in to evaluate
what had worked and what had not and how to recreate something that is better from
the past that also could invite people who were massively displaced from their places
to come back to somewhere that they can just, you know, find a thread to attach to.

LD: Do you think Syrians-, after this terrible dark chapter, do they value their heritage, do
they see it as precious?

MAS: You see heritage is becoming a buzz word now, news of the funds are also being
circulated among people that heritage is a good thing, it said, the next lucrative thing
to be part of. So I think many people are being interested back home in heritage
namely for this cause, but I don't think that there is a genuine uh, let's say, widespread
appreciation of heritage, namely because of the way that heritage was vandalised and
treated before the war. We need to spread awareness, we need to know why heritage
is important, and, I mean, there are practically people who are heritage experts that
they call, they themselves appreciate-, from my view, appreciate heritage for their
own reasons, as a museum object or as something that is appreciated by the west, so
we also must appreciate it.

LD: Syria is a place of architects like you, archaeologist, national museums with
connections to the outside world, are they beginning to have a dialogue about this
and is the government listening, the people who will make the decisions about where
the money will go, what will be built and not built?

MAS: Part of the Syrian tragedy is that we are scattered all over the place and part of the
war is that certain people are talking to certain people, so the only people-, it's like
creating private clubs, people who are supporting a certain faction would be
supported by those who are against that faction, and we have those different and
segregated private clubs. Uh in terms of government, I think the main interest to the
government now is to pull up the economy from its failing state, so I don't think there
is such an emphasis on the importance, or the value of things, although if we are-, if
we are not to be short sighted, if we are thinking about pulling the economy in the
right way and finding peace, we should start from the further end from appreciating value and-, and locating ourselves and putting vision for ourselves in the future.

LD: Of course you'll need the artisans too, people listening who know if Syria will know about your extraordinary artistic traditions, the exquisite mosaics, the wood carvings, the mother of pearl, all of it is a high, high standard, but are those artisans still in Syria?

MAS: Barely, I mean, I think they are an endangered species now because, I mean, this is something that has been facing so many challenges before the war because we weren't appreciating anything and because of the economic policies depended on importing building elements, so those were becoming extinct before the war. And now you barely find anyone and the expertise is also scattered all over the world and it's a very complicated issue because those who were very well known and had the experience, now may be appreciated by the west or in the places they have resettled and they will find it very hard, or difficult, to come to a place that needs to be educated about their work and there would be a pay gap between what they will expect from the west and what will be actually paid back home. But if you looked at our architecture and our heritage, you will find that those artisans were the main brick stones of everything because not only what you would appreciate as an object like the mother of pearl and the inlay-, and the carving, and the-, there is also the masonries and the metal workers, the iron workers, and glass workers, all of these tradesmen, if you like, are lost. And this is something that my husband and I are exploring because we need to open a centre, or, not a centre, many centres all over Syria for those people to be able to come back and spread the knowledge and to train and have trainees as there used to be. To create generations of the real workers, if you like, because the alternative is to import doors, and windows, and whatever, walls, and even units from China or any place that could give you the merchandise, or the goods, I mean, the building materials at good price and very quickly and just build the same ugly boxes all over again.

LD: It's just one reminder that for all of the immense destruction and physical loss in Syria, there's also the less visible, the social loss, the way that human fabric, the relationships between people, have been absolutely shredded, how much of an obstacle is that going to pose to rebuilding Syria again and in the kind of way that you've been describing?

MAS: It's a major obstacle because we didn't reach the civil war because we had a very coherent urban fabric. As I tell the story of our cities in 'The Battle For Home', this urban fabric was wearing out before the war, and that's why we had no safety net, that's why we fell into this tragedy. And now it's all up in the air, I mean, it's wide open and you could be corrupted, you could steal, you could lie, you could-, I mean, you could do anything without having to conceal that as we used to do before the war. So in a way, it's a positive thing that things have exposed themselves and now the good is showing as much as the bad is showing, although the bad is on the surface, so you may get overwhelmed by this, but you have to be more patient and dig deeper, you will find that the reason Syria is still existing, is because of the existence of this good.

LD: And the cracks now are so wide, our discussion is about architecture, heritage, rebuilding, but of course people who are listening will know about the big political
fault line and those who supported President Bashar al-Assad, those who supported the rebels and the fractures within societies, religions, ancestry; in this cauldron, is thinking about heritage a luxury?

MAS: I mean, if you put it next to the life of everyday and the struggle of finding a living every day, of course people would think it’s a luxury, but there are always people who are doing the job that others can not worry about it now. So there is always people who are taking the task of thinking ahead while people are engaged in the more immediate concerns. So I don’t think it’s a luxury because not everybody has to think about heritage, it’s not, I mean, I’m against, by the way, separating heritage as an entity on its own, I mean, it’s a brick to build upon. But I don’t think that thinking about the future, and what to do right, and where to put our next foot, is a luxury, it’s a necessity. And those who cannot afford this, or cannot use their time and their engagements because of the immediate needs, they don’t have to do it.

LD: Does the Syria-ness of Syria have the power to actually bring people together, at least on that level of saving what you know as Syria, I'll always remember in 2001 when the Taliban destroyed the famous standing Buddha statues, Afghans right across the political spectrum, no matter where they stood, all said, this is our heritage, we must save it, we must stand together; could there be a moment like that in Syria? Is there now?

MAS: [slightly overlaps LD] The problem is that this moment occurred so many times over these seven years, so people are getting a bit-, I guess, a bit tired of following these disappointments so frequently. You could sense that people are tired and just want it to end in any way, but it's very critical. It's like reaching the finish line of a race, you have to pull it together to finish your race - although I don’t think it’s a very complimentary, I mean, it's not similar, but we have to find the strength within us to seek the future in the right way in order not to be caught up in a vicious cycle.

LD: Yes, you mentioned these moments and people listening will remember them, some people may have been part of the anguish around the world when the old city, the Citadel in Aleppo - a world heritage site, was at the heart of the fighting when, so called, Islamic state went into Palmyra, they built a replica of the triumphal arch right here in Trafalgar Square, in London, do these moments, as you call them, do they matter, will they matter in the future as Syrians try to come together?

MAS: If we-, I mean, I think those big moments are framed or covered by the media, but you see, we lose equivalent treasures every day, like the ones you’ve seen in the old city, whether in Damascus or in Aleppo, or in Homs. All over Syria, we've lost so many valuable structures and objects and streets, and that's why people have been so tired because this used to happen even before the war. We vandalised our cities, you have to remember that we razed complete quarters of our old cities with all the treasures they had and this is not only in Homs, by the way, this is all over Syria and all over the Syrian cities. I think that once people reclaimed the ownership of their surroundings and started to see glimpses of hope and what those could do to their lives, I think they will be able to develop the public spirit needed to support such a thing.

LD: Let’s try to end on little moments of hope. One that your husband was involved in rebuilding in the old city of Homs, and in the ancient quarter, the metal roof was
peppered with shrapnel because they fought shop to shop, but yet it allowed the light to filter through creating these patterns on the ground, and he took inspiration from that to build a new roof which also had holes to create a pattern of light on the ground.

**MAS:** Yeah, exactly, he was inspired by, by the shrapnel effect and his new roof, or new roof design, was built on a pattern - that laced pattern - that could let in the light in, which is a completely new atmosphere for the old suq. This is how he investigated the past, he asked ‘why was it completely dark? Why was it covered in a way that didn’t allow the light in?’ and the main reason was that, I mean, the easiest material was a metal one, which is not a heritage roof, it's a new addition, just a hundred years ago or something. I don't know, I'm not sure of the date, but he investigated why people had made their choices and was inspired by also a new or recent memory and incorporated this with the same knowledge, building an arched roof that could blend in harmonious way with the old suq. I think this is the way that you could follow the footsteps of our great ancestors that built such an acclaimed city of sites.

**LD:** And we came upon unexpectedly and in a delightful manner, an example of what you would call the generosity of the architecture, going through a warren of lanes and then suddenly opening up into a courtyard with an orange tree and both of us exclaimed.

**MAS:** Yeah, you see, there are so many moral values in the old city. It's part of the architectural experience that you could create as an architect, but you have to have it in you in order to protect it on the building you are building and I think the old cities were generous in many, many ways, whether in the surprises of the space they could allow you, whether with the free water, and fruit, those free experiences, if you like, those corners that could take you from place to place in a very generous way in a very friendly and familiar way, I think this is what distinguished those places.

**LD:** Before you leave us, could you give us some of your wisdom? If the international community wants to help Syria rebuild, what's the best thing they can do, and that of course includes individuals who may want to help in some way?

**MAS:** I think the international communities could support what they think is uh-, I mean, just flooding money into some place is a very dangerous step, it could corrupt the situation more than it is. I think having the awareness and the proper investigation of where this money should go and for what sake and who is holding this cause, because we face this in the international organisation who are working on ground, they may start somewhere with a very good intention, but ended up enabling corruption and enabling warlords to have more money in their pockets, so I guess finding the balance between supporting and knowing what is happening on ground is very critical.

**LD:** Marwa, it's nice to have you in London, and I hope you've been made to feel at home here in this great city. Thank you very much.

**MAS:** Thank you.