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Syrian Walls: capturing ephemera in Damascus and Aleppo

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, April 5th, 2017

I've stored myriad glimpses of Syria in my memory, but the ones I chose to frame were found on ancient walls in Damascus and Aleppo.

They are simple advertisements for plumbing services and tax notices. One is from Damascus' Christian quarter, honoring a recent death.

Syrian Wall #3L / R. Daniel Foster

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For me they are palimpsests, from which text has been scraped, so that a surface can be used again. The residue — the textual history — always bleeds through.

Palimpsest is derived from the Ancient Greek, *palímps?stos*: "rubbed smooth," "again."

Meeting locals in Damascus

I was a member of the first North American press delegation to Syria in late 2009, organized by Unique Image and the ALO Cultural Foundation. Those were boom times for the country, even without comparisons to the brutal civil war that flared about a year later.

I broke free from other journalists at every chance, preferring to meet locals on my own terms. Among them: two young men I met in a park. They were both named Muhammad. Holding out a hookah pipe (called *narjileh* in Syria), they offered me a draft of bright, apple-flavored smoke.

Syrian Wall #5 / R. Daniel Foster

Syrian Wall #5L / R. Daniel Foster

They gave me a midnight tour of Damascus. I named them Muhammad I and Muhammad II.

As we walked along 3,000-year-old byways, they asked me if I lived in Disneyland. And then Muhammad II did a wicked impersonation of George W. Bush.

Having traveled to four Middle Eastern countries, I've never understood Americans' fear of the culture. I felt safer on the streets of Damascus at 1 a.m. than I ever did in Los Angeles, Minneapolis or New York City. Of course, in Syria, that has now changed.

Syrian Wall #7 / R. Daniel Foster

Syrian Wall #7L / R. Daniel Foster

The Umayyad mosques: one in ruins, the other yet standing

We roamed the warren of streets pitched with wood frame houses, rising above us like weathered movie sets. I caught scenes through windows: a woman braiding her mother's hair, a toothless man bathed in a television's bleached blue light.

Before us: the Umayyad mosque, 710 AD, among the oldest and largest in the world. Three towers soared: the Minaret of the Bride, the Minaret of Jesus, and the Minaret of Qaitbay, built by a sultan of Egypt in 1488. Aleppo's Umayyad mosque (715 – 13th century) is now a field of rubble, leveled in 2013.

Syrian Wall #2 / R. Daniel Foster

Ruins also surrounded the Damascus mosque: the crumbled Roman arch from the Temple of Jupiter, which dates to the first century. That Roman temple was built over yet another temple, the Aramean Temple of Hadad (1000 BC), the god of storms and lightning.

History paves over history, paves over history . . .

The already frayed paper signs I photographed no doubt vanished within mere weeks after my visit. The walls they were pasted on are now likely gone. The people who hung them may now be dust.

Time is relentless. It buries everything. Every so often we are granted a glimpse, a quick aim of the camera, and a simple frame – through which to view ephemera.

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Syrian Wall #3 / R. Daniel Foster

Syrian Wall #4 / R. Daniel Foster

Syrian Wall #4L / R. Daniel Foster

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