

# Damascus – Toward a Better Future

## With Special Reference To The Illegal Settlements

*Maher Toutounji*

Architect, Planner  
Ministry of Housing and Utilities, Syria

To be an architect and a planner, feeling responsibility through out his position and living in a city that was built from a rich mixture of civilisations and architecture, one cannot avoid thinking of the urbanisation problems that Damascus is going through and one cannot also ignore the most dangerous phenomenon: the informal housing settlements which are expanding like cancer inside the body and growing day by day. These destroy the old, beautiful Damascus and show a wrong picture of the city.

While this research is an individual attempt based on the previous facts, it tries to apply a new solution, that together with other solutions, is aimed at reaching a new organising plan for Damascus. The solution should satisfy both actors, the citizens and the planners, and reflect the correct picture of our lovely city.

## Background about Syria

Population	16,000,000
Area	184,000 km <sup>2</sup>
Capital	Damascus
Population density	87 inhabitants / km <sup>2</sup>
Government	democracy
Religion	Moslems & Christians National
language	Arabic
Currency	leyra – Syrian pound (US\$ 1 = 50 SP)
Literacy rate	75%
Life expectancy	56 years
Main income sources	wheat, cotton, tobacco export, tourism, textiles and clothes <sup>1</sup>

## Damascus

### Back to History

The Aramean leader established his kingdom in Damascus in 732 BC. After that the Assyrians took power until 605 BC. When Damascus went under Arab



Chaldean rule in 538 BC, the Akhemeans ruled over the Damascus area. During this period the geographer Estrabon mentions Damascus as the most famous city in the west of Asia. When the Arab Nabateans, under the rule of al Hareth rose to power (87 BC) they made Damascus their capital. In 105 AD the Romans destroyed the Nabatean kingdom and established an Arab state with Bosra as its capital. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Damascus like the other parts of Syria came under the rule of the Byzantine Empire during which the influence of the Arab Ghassanites increased.

In 635 the Arab Moslems liberated Damascus from Byzantine rule, and in 661 it became the capital of the first Arab state at the time of the Omayyads. This marked the beginning of the golden epoch, and for a whole century it was the centre of the youthful Islamic empire. The Oomiya's took genuine interest in building up the city. Following the decline and fall of the Omayyade in 749, Damascus went through different periods: Abbassind, Tolonian, and several others, ending with French colonisation. When independence was achieved in 1946 the city started to regain its importance as a significant cultural and political centre in the Arab world.

Damascus, the most ancient, inhabited city is situated on longitude 36.18 east of Greenwich and latitude 33.21 north. It is 690 meters above sea level, about 12 km wide, and has a population of over two million people.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> General Statistics Department, Publication Section, Syria 1994 -1995

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Tourism, Publication Section, Cradle of Civilisation, 1997

## Planning Problems in Damascus

To describe the general situation before getting into the problems associated with the rapid urbanisation, Damascus is the capital of a new independent developing country. It is like other capitals in developing countries going through vital industrial, tourist, and commercial changes. This stage in the life of Damascus has been very obvious during the last ten years. What has happened is that there has been rapid development and a great influx of population. The people are involved in the development and the city needs them, while there was not equal development of housing for all the employed immigrants (from the low-income section), and the original agricultural city was caught in between two pincer tips: one is the old city which is completely full and surrounded by agricultural areas, and the second is the illegal housing settlements which occupied the natural expanding areas of Damascus. Some specific problems today can be summarised as follows:

- Crowding because of immigration from country side and the small cities – to improve the life, work conditions – which cause rapid expansion. For example: the population of Damascus is over 2 million and the number of people in the city doubles during the rush hours.
- The scientific, industrial and commercial process develops rapidly at the same rate as the rest of the world, while housing construction is not expanding as it should to meet new needs.
- Traffic difficulties inside the ancient city caused by the narrow streets and archaeologically important sites such as specialised markets and old residences.
- Agriculture areas surround the city and prevent the expansion of constructed areas.
- The high price of the real estate in the formal planned area leads to the unoriginal buildings, designed to make maximum use of the land.
- The main government and business activities are in the centre of the city, causing problems in transportation. Some of these should be moved out of the centre.
- Inability to follow schedules in carrying out new public projects, for financial, technical, and other reasons.
- The solutions provided by the responsible authorities to these problems are not long-term.
- Rising rate of illegal housing rounding the city.
- Lack of enough parking places inside the city.

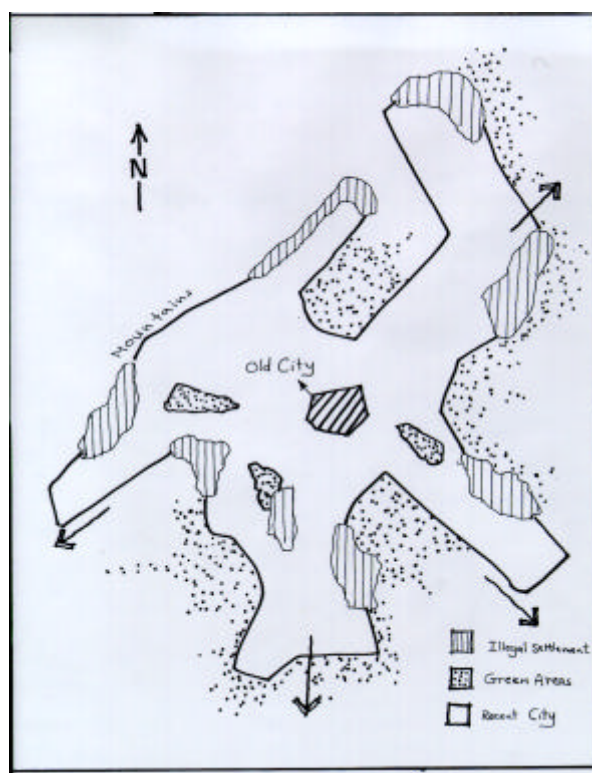
Currently, a new organising plan is being studied to deal with problem of previous organising plan areas for the future constructional expanding and determine.

In my paper I will talk about the informal housing settlements (presenting, analysing, results and strategies).

## Physical Plan of Damascus

The municipality of Damascus is responsible for implementing the plan. Expropriation of land to be developed under the plan cannot begin before there is approval from the Ministry of Housing and Utilities first then from the Cabinet. The actual physical plan was designed by a French architect called Ecoshaar during the period of the French colonisation before 1946.

After independence Syria became a big theatre for many political struggles, all over the sovereignty of the country. Many battles during long period occurred between the Syrian and the Israelis armies, until 1970 when President Hafeez al Assad took over the government, carrying out our aims and hopes and began building the country through his willpower and by the faith of God and his own people.



## Planning Background

Before explaining the issues of the plan of Damascus I want to make it clear that we have a complicated situation on the ground today. It is a completely fully built city, an old city surrounded by the wall with ancient markets, residential areas, archaeological places (figure no1). This old city centre is surrounded by a more recent city that was built this century. The old city has almost the same shape as in the early days, and the plan by Ecoshaar in 1946 has mainly not been implemented. The part of the city outside the wall is a mixture of many planning methods. There is no identity for the city. Some parts have been implemented as planned in 1946. Others are implemented or under construction according to plans

proposed by the Municipality co-operating with the Ministry of Housing & Utilities (figure no1). These plans reflect a very long period of study and implementation stages.

Around this city we have the agriculture areas which are the most important resource for the people who live in the surroundings, and which its now vanishing daily by the illegal housing settlements occupied by legal immigrants.

With no space between these three main parts, and with such a difficult situation with high average population growth (3.2% p.a.), what we need is to solve housing problems in the existing settlements first and then identify new expansion areas beyond the agriculture ring.



Figure no 1: the old city of Damascus within the wall.

### Current Plan

From this short introduction we can see how Syria in general and Damascus in particular could lose its capability and use all its money during the period between 1946–1970, and that get us to the real reason of being so slow in implementing the old plan. The outer edge of the city, bordering the agricultural area, was executed as planned, but the areas surrounding the old city were implemented in several stages by the local authorities (the Ministry of Housing and Utilities and the Municipality of Damascus city, and the municipality of Damascus country side, shown above) while the natural expanding areas were occupied by the illegal housing settlements.

### Negatives

- The plan was proposed when Damascus was a city of about 500,000 people and this number doubled many times since these days (now more than 2 million).
- The plan was drawn without any consideration to the style of our traditional life, habits, Islamic architecture, etc.) and the planner did not consider the natural expansion of the city and he expansion in opposite geographical direction.
- The local authority faces these days many difficulties trying to implement the plan, and now we can see some parts organised according to the plan and others done according to proposals made by the Planning Office in the Municipality, so what we have today a misshapen city with a deformed plan.
- Many archaeological areas will vanish in time if we keep dealing with Ecoshaar’s plan, which does not consider the old city at all.

In my opinion if the plan was implemented immediately within fifteen years the whole situation of Damascus would have changed, and it might be easier to solve the current problems of the physical plan of Damascus.

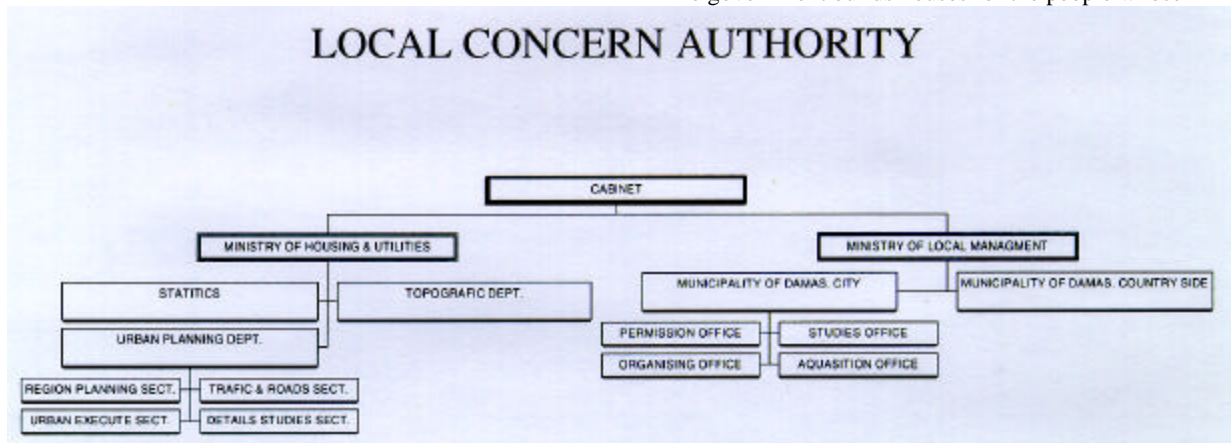
### Needs for Solution

The long time between drawing the plan and executing it caused a lot of problems. The biggest obstruction these days in the way of developing expansion areas is the illegal housing settlements.

There was lack of professionals during the period between 1950 – 1970 who could overcome the mistakes of the Ecoshaar plan or drawing a new one instead. We can see how much we need a new comprehensive plan based on studies of the special needs of each part within the city. We should connect the parts in right way when necessary, considering informal housing settlements as a part of the running city. The concerned authority which is going to study the parts should consider the future expansion of Damascus for at least the coming 30 years, and even longer for the restudied part of the city.

### Proposal Actions

Before going on in my proposal actions I should highlight the strategy of the government in the housing process. The government builds houses for the people whose



properties are under acquisition, being covered by the plan. We can say that half of these projects succeeded while the others failed, because the site was very far from the city and lacked the necessary utilities. Also the people involved in these settlements should pay a certain amount for the houses, and this is much more than they can afford or that the houses are worth.

On the other hand the government allowed and encouraged the housing corporations for the low-income people and provided these corporations with land near the city but the problems still exist because there are many more housing corporations than the government can provide with land.

We still work with unfair acquisition laws, and the Ministry of Housing and Utilities has tried hard for a long time to develop these laws and get the necessary approvals to implement them.

The main concepts in my recommendations:

- The actions must be realistic and reflect our daily life and the community situation.
- They should open new ways for rising the capacity of the technical staff in all the associated institutions.
- Plan the implementation and share the responsibility among the actors, under the supervision of high government authority.
- Create a new loans system that can give the real impact with low interest.
- Include the residents as an important partner in the housing process.

What to do? The question still open. All different levels of concerned authorities and professionals are still trying to find a solution they can agree on.

And in this particular point I can involved myself after all these years of studying and working in the Ministry of Housing and observing the main events going on in the Municipality of Damascus. Below I list the main steps I think we should do to achieve a good organising plan for Damascus city.

1. Stop right now dealing with the old physical plan (Ecoshaare's) where it is penetrated by the informal housing settlements, and start to draw a new plan for these intersecting areas, considering the existing situation and the direction of expansion.
2. The Government through its authorities should allow the owners within the formal areas to rehabilitate their properties according to new building systems with new facilities, and encourage them by reducing taxes imposed on these structures.
3. The local authorities should allowed the joint and the private sector to be involved in important projects within the city according to new fair provisions for the participants.
4. The government should also allow establishment of private banks that could provide bigger loans than Government can afford for the low-income housing projects, and all banks must raise their loans to allow payment over a longer time.

5. All the responsibility of the old city within the wall should be given to the Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry should be supported with qualified groups to work with it technical staff.
6. Restudy the areas covered by the plan but where it is not yet implemented. Use new methods and consider the current situation and density of these parts. These studies could be done as local competitions.

## Informal Housing Settlements

These are one of the most important obstructions blocking the way for implementing of the expansion section of the plan. As an case study I will describe one of the biggest settlements near Damascus, presenting the most relevant findings from my study about this area. I start by analysing the situation, trying to specify the reasons for this phenomenon, and seeing how the random housing areas affected other parts in the organising plan. Finally I make proposals for rehabilitation, strategies and actors.

### Definition

It is the informal settlements which exist either inside the city or around it, and built without formal permission from the government authority, and which always established as a huge crowded settlement without formal organisation or any public utilities .

Table No: 1 Basic Information on Illegal Settlements

Place	Illegal areas	Population	Density
Damascus	1270 hectares	876,000	689/ h
Countryside	2400 hectares	264,000	110/ h
Total	3670 hectares	1,140,000	

For an example:(figure no2) Ash al Warwar which called Bird's Nest for its strange shape, is one of the biggest informal settlement occupy many hills near to Damascus.



Figure no 2: view of one side from Ash al Warwar illegal settlement.

## Characteristics

About 6 km from the centre of Damascus crowded, dense blocks with a population of 100,000 people living in mainly two floor houses in very bad living conditions, without the minimum provision of the adequate shelter. 100 families were randomly chosen for the survey.

- There is no space for building any of the public services in the areas (e.g. school, clinic, power transformer, parks, cultural centre).
- The financial status of the population is very bad mainly the low income employed.
- The level of illiteracy is about 5% among men and 2% among women, and about 15% of the women who completed elementary school have jobs.
- 60% of the sample neither read nor are interested in the newspaper.
- The average of the density is about 867 person/hectares which is one of the highest in the world.
- The settlement land is 90% government owned and 10% private property.
- Almost the whole area of this sample is situated inside the organisational plan of Damascus.
- The building materials used: stone, cement blocks, concrete, steel beams.
- No one tried to consult an engineer or even to have a plan for the house building (figure no 3).
- The cost of one informal house is around US\$ 3,000–7,000; the cost of an ordinary home in the city centre is about US\$ 55,000–70,000.<sup>3</sup>

Table no: 2 Sanitation Services

Persons	Number of rooms	Bathroom	Families n = 100
----	-----	In house	60
----	-----	Separate	40

Table No: 3 Persons Distribution by Room

Persons	Number of rooms	Bathroom	Families n = 100
6	2 rooms	----	60
6 – 7	3 rooms	----	30
7 – 9	4 rooms	----	8
7 – 10	More than 4 rooms	----	2

## Main Reasons For Increase

From looking at the actual situation of Damascus and my years working with the Ministry of Housing, I can summarise the main reasons for the increase in illegal housing settlements as follows :

1. The areas of illegal settlement grew rapidly as one of the negative results of rapid unplanned and unsuccessful development in the country as it attempted to catch-up with modern development around the world.



Figure no 3: it shows the illegal construction houses built by the people.

2. Immigration from all the parts of the country to the cities caused by the concentration of economic, social and educational activities which attract people. To settle in the illegal housing areas is cheaper compared to the city.
3. The multiple assaults by Israeli forces in the south of the country caused a huge migration from these parts to the main cities especially Damascus.
4. The high growth rate which is about 3.2% p.a. (one of the highest in the developing countries) and inability to accommodate obtain this population within the organising plan.
5. The inability of the actual organising rules to eliminate the phenomenon of informal housing settlement.

## The Negative Results

In the following I will identify the negative results in two parts, first within the settlement, and second for the influence on the organised areas.

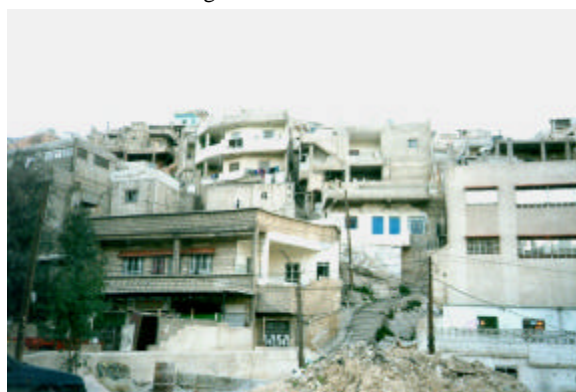


Figure no 4: shows the bad informant of the settlement.

### Part I

- Decline in the health situation and spreading of the infectious illnesses all over the illegal areas.
- Spreading of many social problems especially anarchy inside the community of this settlement.
- The existing of such settlements creates a huge structural mess, and it is difficult to provide services.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Housing and Utilities, Details Studies Section, Working Group 1996

- The substantial dangers to the life of the people from their informal houses which are build by themselves without any safety control of the structures. (Figure no 4)

## Part II

- The settlements obstruct implementation of governmental infrastructure projects within the limits of the illegal housing areas.
- They occupy agriculture land around Damascus, which is an important natural resource for the city, and causes less food production.
- The cause serious damage in the environment around the settlement and also contaminate water sources.
- The illegally draw power and water resources causing a reduction in the availability of these vital resources for the formal parts of Damascus.

In spite of the fact that the people who are living in illegal housing settlements they are still forming a kind of homogeneous community can be easily promoted their role in participating in rehabilitation projects, and make it more easier for the specialist groups who are going to be involved in the education campaigns stage which will be mention later on in my short-term strategies.

## Strategies

The strategy to solve this problem (the informal housing settlements) should start from the basic reasons the settlements were formed. And any agency that wants to work effectively must have the authority to make decisions, because it takes so long to receive permission.

The strategy can be summarised as follows:

### Long-term

1. The three authorities: the Ministry of Housing and Utilities, the Municipality of Damascus City and the Municipality of Damascus Countryside should have the main responsibility to produce the necessary rules which has the role to eliminate this phenomenon by providing this people with suitable healthy shelter all over the country.
2. These three authorities which govern the organisation plans, urban programmes, and system of building must create and develop the building system. And the system of construction should be flexible and easy to be implemented.
3. Capacity building for the staff of these authorities who are responsible for implementation of these plans and making detailed plans for the city.
4. Create new expanding areas outside the city for the construction of housing for the low-income population, and encourage local investors to invest in housing by facilitating the tax rules to reach good prices for the low-income people for the houses.

5. Providing low-income people with enough loans with low interest to own formal houses. This will decrease the phenomenon of illegal areas.
6. Making studies for the agriculture areas around the city and fixing rules for construction and housing for farmers by encourage agriculture and minimise use of this land for informal housing and fixing prices for their crops.
7. The local authority should compensate the owners of land expropriated for the plan, either by giving them new land or money equal to the actual value.
8. The government should restudy the whole economic situation and create new solutions to eliminate the rising prices for the real-estate inside and outside the city.
9. Decentralise government offices and educational institutions to avoid concentration in the main cities, especially Damascus. This will reduce the pressure at the city, since not so many people must travel into the city so often, and at the same time the local authority should start a new strategy aiming to create balance between the city and its surroundings, which also will reduce the immigration into Damascus.
10. Working much harder and supporting the efforts for the main road projects according to national codes as soon as possible to reach a modern road net in Damascus, solving the problems of crowding and traffic jams. The local transportation department should consider new ways such as metro, train, etc. to solve traffic problems and support these projects with all the financial needs (subsidies).
11. Creating as far as possible parking areas all around the city near the main utilities, offices buildings, and markets.

### Short-term

What I mean by this is the first steps we should take before beginning the rehabilitation projects for the informal housing settlements. These are summarised as follows:

- Starting education campaigns among the residents and registering the interested families in the programme of the project. These campaigns should be done through governmental authorities (institutes, ministries, mass media). Applications can be registered in special office built on the site and it will serve as a communication office.
- The Ministry of Housing and Utilities in co-operation with the Municipality of Damascus City should prepare all the drawings, plans and details for the rehabilitation project. They should consider the current landscape. The government should support these authorities by giving them the power to act.
- Have all the working steps scheduled in a short timetable and try to implement each step as close to the schedule as possible.

- The action area will be divided into sections and implementation must start from the interior sections toward the outer ones. The people living in the same section will be removed temporarily into special units built for the rehabilitation process.

Indeed the most important issue to achieve the real benefits of the whole strategy is to get international assistance to help the authorities with management and planning advice, however it's the Government's responsibility to get this assistance and to provide all the means to have it implemented.

## Actors

### Public Sector

Representative of local concerned authorities in housing and urbanising issues which through their systems could play the main role in studying and preparing all the stages of rehabilitating the informal housing settlements. The public companies will provide all the necessary inputs (workers, equipment, building materials, etc.) and the public sector is the most important financial resource for these projects.

### Joint Sector

Appears when private companies co-operate with public companies in executive operations, and this kind of relationship between the both sectors can be good in implementing bigger projects where the public sector is not able to do it alone. In this sector the responsibility for financial needs will be shared.

### Private Sector

Play a role in being responsible for small structures in the big projects such as: clinics, mosques, schools, shops, kindergarten, etc. The private sector participation will reduce the responsibility of the public sector (finances, equipment, etc.).

### Participants

The education campaigns mentioned in the short-term strategies are very important to get the participants to understand and perform their roles. It can be seen in this two items:

- Provide labour under the supervision of the project management. This participation cannot succeed in Syria unless the residents trust the management, and involving international experts may provide credibility.
- Financial participation will arise as small payments during the earliest period of the project steps (foundation step) and the remaining payments will be collected through long-term fixed interest loans (15 years at least).

Whoever, as soon as we starting rehabilitation project in one of the illegal housing settlements, the people in others one will rush automatically to participate in such similar projects.

## Design Issues

The following items and the idea of the housing types which I will talk about is specially made for the rehabilitation project of the illegal housing settlements, and only professionals will be responsible for putting the adequate solutions under the supervision of the management.

### Main Concepts

The most important concepts we should consider in designing houses in rehabilitation projects are:

- The economic and social habits of the people and the traditions ruling the community within the settlement which it almost the same in all the informal settlements around Damascus, and the reflection of this impacts on the new organised plan to this settlement and the details studies.
- The variation in the number of the families between 3 – 8 person that requires multiple solutions for the houses.
- Consider modern technological devices when designing the site and the houses such as ventilation, electricity and lighting.

### Type Of Houses

In following I present three types of houses designed for low-income families and divide them into three types according to the income standard.

#### First Type

Its for the lowest section of the low-income people and it is like row houses designed in an Islamic style (narrow roads, half covered streets, two stories) and with modern changes inside the houses. This kind of design allows one to move from the private yard in the house to the semi-private space between the houses and then to the common area which sits in the centre of the big cluster. (figure no 5).

#### Second Type

It is for the middle section of the low-income group. It is from 3 – 5 floors high, and easy to form it as you wish because I designed it as flexible units. Between the units are some empty spaces used for either parking or as a small public garden for the neighbourhood (figure no 6).

#### Third Type

It is for the high section of the low-income group and it is in two floor duplex form, designed as a small villa, with sloped brick roof with a small private backyard and a covered garage (figure no 7).

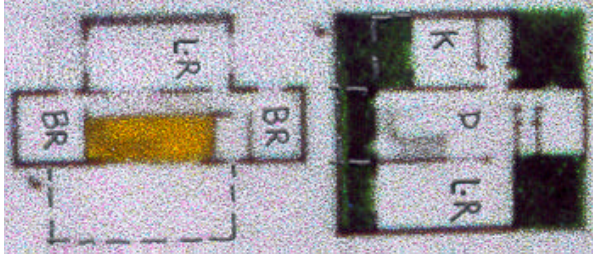


Figure no 5: the plans of the first type design.

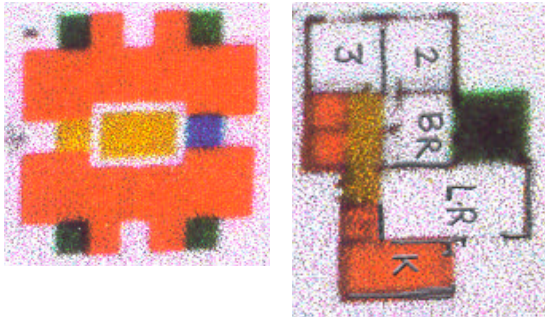


Figure no 6: the plans of the second type design.

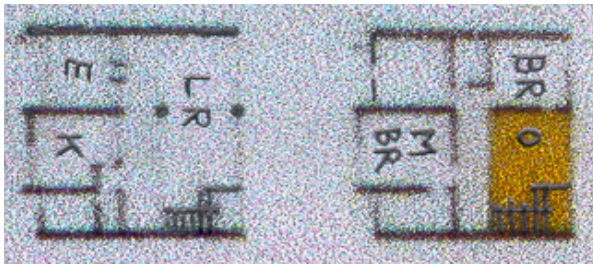


Figure no 7: the plans of the third type design.

## Conclusion

After presenting all the paragraphs of my research I hope that I have been able to explain clearly and completely. These strategies I mentioned would be the most important to start building a well organised Damascus.

The government will lose its credibility day by day if it did not start seriously dealing with the illegal housing settlements in positive methods, based on the principle of co-operation with the population in these settlements, and promote the participation role in the rehabilitation process.

The government through its concerned authorities has made a lot of important decisions for the informal housing settlements, but there are many difficulties that stop these decisions from being implemented, and the authorities worked hard trying to reduce these difficulties day by day.

And the Ministry of Housing and Utilities during the last few years made many efforts and took big steps in building the capacity of its employees. It has finished a huge number of organising plans supported by details (in

practical scientific methods, and all the preliminary steps like topographic survey, population statistics, etc. were made by its own qualified staff. The main strategy of the Ministry now is to create a balanced servicing system between the cities and the countryside all over the country that will help to reach a fair balance between them, and that is the golden key for solving most urbanisation problems in Damascus.