beit el arabi

Final Report - *www.beitelarabi.com*

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Beit el Arabi is a digital archive documenting the history, architecture, and stories of Babtouma's courtyard homes in Damascus.

Introduction & Concept

Elevator Pitch

Babtouma is home to many of Damascus's oldest surviving courtyard houses, and many of them remain undocumented. These homes carry centuries of history, architecture, and stories. The details of these homes found today are scattered across books, academic archives, websites, and word of mouth. Even the beauty of these homes is rarely properly captured. There hasn't been a single resource that encompasses everything together - the architecture, history, beauty, and stories. Beit el Arabi is a digital archive aimed at closing the gap. It brings Babtouma's courtyard homes together in one place, fully documented and properly seen.

The Problem

There are several barriers to researching Babtouma's homes. The main barrier is the country's political instability. Since the outbreak of civil war in 2011, the political instability in Syria has caused buildings to be damaged, communities to disperse, and documentation to disappear. A number of these homes have come under state control. Maktab Anbar, for example, is now used as a government center where people renew IDs and driver's licenses. While Al Azem Palace has been converted into a museum. This shift in use restricts access and can make proper viewing difficult. Decades of neglect under the Assad regime left many of these homes without proper care, and the civil war since 2011 caused further damage. Unless they were taken under the wing of a private owner or institute who can fund their restoration, not much was being done to take care of them. Another barrier that is faced is the language barrier. Much of the research available online, in documents, and in archives is written in Arabic. When visiting the homes in person, the information shared with visitors is in Arabic. This creates a language barrier that keeps the information out of reach for many users. On top of this, many of these homes aren't properly visually documented. Some sites, like Visit Damascus Syria, do have a few nice images but it's inconsistent. A lot of homes only have one or two photos, or none. There's no focus on the details of the house, such as the woodwork, the doors, or the ceilings — they're more generic photos. They don't properly capture the actual beauty of these homes, doing them no justice.

With all these barriers in place, there is a large gap between how culturally and architecturally significant these homes are and how little has actually been properly documented about them. Many of these homes carry significance not just in their architecture, but in who lived there and how. They were homes to multi-generational families sharing a single courtyard home, a way of life that has largely disappeared from the city today. Today, very few of Babtouma's courtyard homes are still owned by a family at all, let alone the original family who built them. Most have been converted into cultural spaces such as hotels or restaurants, with only a handful remaining residential. Beit el Arabi responds to this by focusing on specific heritage homes in Babtouma. Through this, the documentation will be direct and focused, aiming to present a complete picture of the home: its history, beauty, and story. Rather than scattered and fragmented information.

Value Proposition & USP

Today, Syria is in a place where it can finally open to the world, and its community is eager to share the beauty the country holds. The goal of Beit el Arabi is to document the courtyard homes of Babtouma in a way that no existing resource does. It aims to capture the beauty of these homes through detailed photography of the doors, ceramic tiles, and decorative elements. It'll trace how the homes have evolved through the Umayyad, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods and even into the French Mandate. It will share the story of each home: why they carry courtyards, and why they were built the way they were.

What makes Beit el Arabi unique is its focus. Rather than covering Damascus's architecture broadly, it focuses on the Old City of Damascus, Babtouma, and its individual homes. This depth is what sets it apart; it will combine history, design, and proper documentation into a single resource.

Manifesto & Rationale

Although I have no direct family connection to Babtouma, I am Syrian and have always believed that Syria holds many hidden gems that go unrecognised. It's an honour to be from a country known for having the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, and the courtyard homes in Babtouma are among its hidden gems. They are beautiful homes that carry centuries of stories and heritage that are largely unseen by the outside world. My interest in this project came from my own curiosity about these homes. I wanted to explore them further and capture their beauty in a way that hasn't been done before. When it came to choosing a topic for my major project, this is the one that I kept leaning towards and coming back to.

Research

Competitor Analysis

To understand where Beit el Arabi would fit, I looked into two types of websites: cognate sites and non-cognate sites. First, cognate sites gave me an idea of what currently exists in the subject area of courtyard homes in the Old City of Damascus. Then, non-cognate sites — projects in completely different fields that share a similar approach or structure, such as storytelling through individual pages, timelines, or illustration. Both gave me different kinds of insights on how I could build and structure Beit el Arabi.

Cognate Site Analysis

When it came to researching previous content that is available online, there were several websites that I reviewed: Archnet, the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKDN), the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, and Visit Damascus Syria. These are the four that I selected because they documented heritage architecture and highlight specific homes in Babtouma that I am researching. They offer insight, purpose, and scale to some of the homes that Beit el Arabi is also highlighting. However, while these homes are acknowledged and referenced, the way they are presented doesn't do justice to the beauty they hold.

Archnet

Archnet was the first website I came across while researching homes I wanted to highlight. It's an open digital library from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and MIT, with thousands of images, sites, and publications on architecture across the Muslim world. Archnet includes documentation on several of the homes I am researching for Beit el Arabi, including Bayt al-Nizam and Al-Azem Palace, hosted through the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme's restoration case studies, as well as Maktab Anbar, documented separately through Archnet's Anbar School Restoration records. The scale at which the content is offered is quite massive, with up to nearly 470 tabs of historic Islamic monuments available to research. The amount of content on the site is overwhelming, with no clear guidance for users. Overall, it's a reliable and well-sourced resource, but not one designed with ease of navigation in mind.

Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKDN)

The Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme is part of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, a unique organization focused on restoring major historical landmarks across more than 10 countries, with Syria among them. AKDN has directly restored Bayt al-Nizam, one of the homes I am covering for Beit el Arabi, and separately recognized the restoration of Al-Azem Palace through the 1981-1983 Aga Khan Award for Architecture. As a charitable organization, the AKDN website provides information for conservationists and heritage professionals rather than the general public. This lends credibility to the homes I'm covering for Beit el Arabi where it's due.

UNESCO

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre lists the Ancient City of Damascus as a World Heritage Site. Listed in 1979, it recognizes 125 historical monuments of Damascus. Unlike Archnet and AKDN, UNESCO doesn't directly highlight individual courtyard homes in Damascus. The listing does cover the Old City of Damascus, including Babtouma as a historic district. Babtouma was recognized as one of the most endangered sites in 2007 by the World Monuments Fund. UNESCO has also recognized the Ancient City of Damascus on its World Heritage in Danger list since 2013. UNESCO's recognition of the city confirms the area's historical importance, but its scale-driven approach leaves individual homes, such as those I am documenting, without the depth of coverage that Beit el Arabi provides.

visitdamascussyria.com

This site is structured around trip planning first and foremost, with its main navigation built around itineraries (5-day, 7-day, 10-day, and 14-day trip plans), attractions, and travel tips, rather than around the homes themselves. The courtyard homes are part of the attractions section, with some of the homes highlighted. The way the content is portrayed on this site is very commercial and has a goal of attracting tourists. The site's main purpose is to help tourists plan their visit to Syria, not to build a lasting, story-driven archive.

Non-Cognate Analysis

For non-cognate sites, I looked outside the heritage and Middle Eastern architecture space entirely, to see how other fields approach similar problems of storytelling and archiving. I chose In Situ and The Boat because, despite covering completely different subject matter, both offer something structurally or emotionally relevant to how I want Beit el Arabi to work.

In Situ (insitu.org.uk)

In Situ is a digital archive that tells stories about the history of Scotland through its rich archaeology. I think this is a good non-cognate website to compare to Beit El Arabi, because it carries the same concept but approaches it in a different manner. The two projects are closely aligned: In Situ organizes its content so that each excavation has its own dedicated story page, tagged by historical period, and the site also has separate Map and Timeline sections so you can explore chronologically. The same concept is mirrored in Beit El Arabi, where each courtyard home has its own page and a chronological timeline to support it.

The Boat (www.sbs.com.au/theboat/)

SBS's The Boat is an interactive graphic novel adapting Nam Le's short story about the Vietnamese diaspora. The site is built from hand-drawn illustration, animation, and sound design, and the story is told through an immersive, scroll-based experience. The reason I chose this website as a comparison to Beit El Arabi is more for what it could be: to tell each home's story through an immersive illustrated experience like The Boat would be a goal I hope to achieve one day. A similar concept could work for Beit El Arabi, an immersive scroll that mimics walking through the rooms of a courtyard home, guiding the visitor from the entrance door through to the inner courtyard.

Business

Niche & Purpose

When I first thought of this website, I can't say I was too proud of it, or that it was what I wanted to create for my major project. At first, the trajectory was to create something that would preserve the homes in Damascus. Since I was a kid, I was always fascinated by their beauty and the history they carried. They always felt undervalued and underappreciated. So I saw this as an opportunity to create a story for some of these homes. I didn't want to create something too commercial, yet something with a bit of purpose and cultural preservation.

When researching what was already available online, I found that the digital heritage space was growing, but still underserved. There was a clear gap. There are resources such as Archnet, UNESCO, the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme, and various personal sites, but none are focused specifically on the courtyard homes of Babtouma and the unique architecture they carry. Beit el Arabi is meant to fill that gap.

The site's purpose carries three parts. First, it exists to preserve knowledge and history of these homes. Each of these homes has gone through conflict and neglect due to Syria's ongoing political instability. Second, it exists to give justice to the architectural history and beauty of these homes. Third, it exists to make that knowledge accessible in a way it currently is not. At the end every home documented, every story recorded, adds lasting value to them and that was always the point.

A Community-Built Resource

Rather than pursuing commercial revenue, Beit el Arabi's long-term sustainability is built around community and diaspora participation. This also comes at a time when there is a large move for cultural preservation happening in the country under the new regime. The model that I aimed to create fits both the subject matter and the likely audience far better than a commercial approach would.

The Syrian diaspora, which began in 2011, has created a large, dispersed community with a strong connection to heritage, memory, and what has been lost or is at risk of being lost. For decades, Syria's heritage was neglected and kept hidden from the world under the previous regime. Now, with that barrier lifted, there is room for its history and architecture to finally be properly documented and shared. A resource like Beit el Arabi isn't just information; it's a way to create and maintain a connection to a place and history that displacement has made it difficult to access directly.

This could grow into a layered model that welcomes contributions from the community:

- **Knowledge contribution:** Diaspora members, family descendants of homeowners, or independent researchers who could hold photographs, histories, or documents that don't exist elsewhere. Beit el Arabi could position itself to receive and incorporate these contributions over time, creating an archive that the community helps build over time.

- **Small-scale donations:** The goal was never to pursue large-scale funding, but this could grow into a simple donation mechanism. Over time, it could develop into a small funding program directed toward restoring the homes themselves.
- **Academic Partnerships:** Existing heritage and archival organisations, though broader in scope, represent potential long-term collaborators rather than competitors. Given the gaps that still exist, a partnership or citation relationship could help fill in missing information while extending Beit el Arabi's credibility and reach.

SWOT

To get a better idea of where the project stands I carried out a SWOT analysis. This helped me asses where Beit el Arabi stands as an independent project. I was able to get a clearer understanding of what I could realistically build on, and what risks I needed to plan for.

Strengths

A unique focus that documents the homes in Babtouma with depth.

Strong emotional and cultural resonance for those exploring Syria's architectural history and beauty.

Non-commercial direction that builds trust and credibility as a preservation project rather than a tourist or profit venture.

Weaknesses

Building and creating the community for this site will be difficult.

Relies on currently available information, much of which is hard to access and is hidden.

As an independent project, it's hard to establish credibility in comparison to UNESCO or AKDN.

Less access to information and resources than institutions with more established networks.

Opportunities

Growing interest in digital heritage preservation as a response to conflict-driven cultural loss.

Diaspora communities increasingly active online and open to contributing to Syria's heritage.

Potential for academic citation or partnership as the site matures and gains credibility.

Content (glossary, time lines, home profiles) can expand indefinitely.

Threats

Political instability in Syria could restrict future access to homes or source material.

Risk of misinformation.

Larger institutions could eventually build competing, better-funded resources.

Sustained engagement is hard to guarantee for a niche cultural archive without active promotion.

Cultural Context

The History of Damascene Architecture

The courtyard homes are one of the oldest and most enduring architectural structures in Damascus. They were shaped by climate, culture, and the rhythms of daily life. The homes are built with an inward focus, presenting a plain, humble façade to the street, yet opening up into a private courtyard that carries fountains, trees, and seating areas. The interior reflects a way of living passed down through Syrian culture for centuries. Centred on family and community life, sheltered from the noise and heat of the city.

Damascus itself is widely regarded as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, with a history stretching back thousands of years. Babtouma is one of the oldest inhabited neighbourhoods within the Old City of Damascus, and it holds some of the finest surviving examples of architecture. They carry intricate stonework, carved wooden screens, and tilework that has been shaped by generations of craftsmanship. Many of these places are still standing, though they aren't in the best condition nor properly documented.

A History of Neglect

For decades, Syria's heritage was largely neglected and hidden due to the previous regime. Access to information, sites, and the homes themselves was restricted and little to nothing was done to preserve them. Along with the civil war from 2011, much of Damascus's architectural heritage fell into further despair. They were damaged by the conflict, abandoned and left to decay.

As a result, a large gap grew between how culturally significant these homes are and how little of them has actually been documented. Photography, where it exists, is outdated or low quality. Written history is scattered across academic archives. Even visiting these homes in person is often difficult, due to restricted access or the country's ongoing instability. What Beit el Arabi responds to is not just an absence of information, but decades of a country's history being kept out of view.

Cultural Preservation Under a New Regime

With the new regime, there has been a large interest in cultural preservation happening across the country. Whereas before restoration and documentation was restricted or under-resourced, there is now more room for Syria's history to be studied, shared and protected. Beit el Arabi is created within this movement towards a more open era for Syria's cultural heritage. To be part of a movement that is underway to reclaim and properly document Syria's cultural heritage, at a time when doing so is finally accepted and possible.

Coexistence

Babtouma is historically significant beyond the architecture that it carries. It's an area that carried mosques, churches and synagogues side by side for centuries;

reflecting Damascus's long tradition for cultural and religious coexistence. Although the Jewish community that once lived there has largely left, the area is still known today as the Jewish quarter, and traces of this shared history remain in the architecture of the neighbourhood and its homes. The neighbourhoods and homes themselves reflect this diversity, carrying architectural traces of the many communities who lived alongside one another here. Documenting these different homes not only preserves their history but shares a wider story of how these communities shared space, craftsmanship and daily space in Damascus.

Digital Heritage

Beit el Arabi is part of a global movement towards digital heritage archiving, using the accessibility of the web to document, preserve, and share cultural history that could otherwise be lost. In Syria, this movement is a response to the conflict-driven cultural loss the country has endured. Digital documentation has become one of the few reliable ways to preserve this history. It ensures that the knowledge survives regardless of what happens to the physical structure. Syria is currently going through a period of huge change, one where people are finally able to share the country's beauty with the world. Digitally is one of the best ways to connect everyone to it, reaching a global audience that couldn't access this heritage otherwise.

Organisations such as Archnet, UNESCO, and the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme are part of this same movement at a much larger scale. Beit el Arabi positions itself as a smaller, more focused continuation of this same effort. A more narrowed approach to a specific neighbourhood, type of architecture, and the history it carries.

Diaspora Connection

For the Syrian diaspora, specifically the community that fled after 2011, this cultural context carries a bit more weight. Many members haven't been able to see Syria's history and culture firsthand, yet still cherish it deeply. A digital archive like Beit el Arabi offers a way to maintain a connection to a place and a history that displacement has made difficult, or impossible, to access directly. This project sits at the intersection of architectural preservation and diaspora memory, offering a way for the community to connect with and learn more about the culture and history Syria carries.

Where Beit el Arabi Fits

Beit el Arabi sits within three current movements happening in Syria: a shift toward digital heritage preservation, a national moment of renewed interest in Syria's cultural history, and a community seeking ways to stay connected. It's a response to the ongoing changes in Syria, smaller in scale than the larger institutions such as Archnet, UNESCO, or the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme. This narrower focus allows Beit el Arabi to highlight certain homes with more depth, carrying more of a storyline for each home and giving it a fuller picture.

Commodity (Content Strategy & UX)

Website Content

Beit el Arabi's content is organised around house profiles, an architectural glossary, and photography. Together, this information creates a whole picture for each house: its history, architecture, and beauty.

For each house profile, a time line bar guides the visitor through the house's key points: construction, major events, restoration, and present day. This format was chosen to create an experience for the user that felt like they were going through a book. Each time line entry includes a year, a title, a short paragraph of history and a single image.

The architectural glossary is organised into four categories: Structural Elements, Courtyard & Water Features, Architectural Details, and Materials & Finishes. They are meant to highlight the recurring features found across Babtouma's courtyard homes. Each term is presented with the English name, Arabic script, an image, and short explanation of what it is and why it matters. The structure allows the visitor to browse by category and learn the vocabulary broadly or look up a specific term the moment they encounter it in a house's time line.

The photography in the site doesn't have its own section, but it's a vital part of the site. It appears throughout the time line entries and the glossary. Images were selected specifically to highlight the beauty of each home through its courtyards, tile work, ceilings, and other decorative details.

Target Audience & Persona

Beit el Arabi's audience isn't a single type of visitor. It has the potential to attract different types of visitors spanning from academic researchers, content creators, heritage professionals and people from the Syrian diaspora. Four personas were developed to design content that fits each of their needs, covering academic depth, editorial storytelling, professional documentation, and personal connection.

Khalil 45 — Beirut, Lebanon — Heritage Preservation Professor



Khalil works with UNESCO and various NGOs across the Middle East that focus on the preservation of historical sites. He has a passion to raise awareness for historical sites and protect them.

Goals — Document historical buildings, access architectural information and reports, collect and share reliable sources with colleagues and students, raise awareness about architectural heritage, and find accurate, well-organized resources.

Frustrations — Lack of available content on certain areas, and poor organization that makes referencing difficult.

Lina 34 — Toronto, Canada — Architecture Student (Masters)

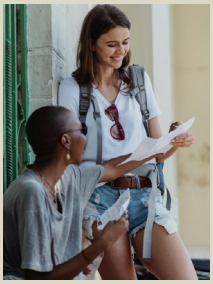


Lina is studying architecture for her Masters Degree and has a strong interest in historical buildings. She's always researching for case studies on historical homes that are still inhabited in the Middle East. She's particularly researching how cultural values can shape living spaces in different parts of the world.

Goals — Learn about traditional homes in the Middle East, understand the architectural elements in the middle eastern homes, and access reliable and academic resources.

Frustrations — Poor image resources, lack of quality and unreliable sources, inaccessible language, and can't travel to certain countries for the field work.

Caroline 27 — Mexico — Creative Consultant



Caroline is a young woman, who works for a cultural and lifestyle publication. They have a monthly printed magazine along with a frequently updated website/blog. There is a strong interest for global cities, historical spaces and visual narratives. Sometimes Caroline gets to travel abroad for certain projects.

Goals — Discover unique antique stories to highlight, access high-quality images for publications, find engaging narratives for the features, and well curated content that feels intentional and genuine.

Frustrations — Lack of genuine content, can't physically visit places without proper sources on where to go, and needs rich content that is well-documented and easily accessible.

Yousef 31 — Berlin, Germany — University Student



Yousef left Damascus with his family in 2012 and has lived in Berlin ever since. He grew up hearing stories about his grandparents' old neighbourhood in Babtouma but has never seen it in person. He follows Syrian heritage pages on social media and searches online whenever he wants to feel closer to a home he can't visit.

Goals — Reconnect with a place tied to family memory and identity, find visual and historical detail that makes the homes feel real, not abstract, discover if any of the documented houses relate to his own family's history, and share what he finds with relatives.

Frustrations — Most existing resources are academic and impersonal, content is hard to find and rarely visual, and no way to know if a house has any connection to his own family without asking older relatives directly.

Content Strategy: Meeting Audience Needs

Lina, the Architecture Student, comes to Beit el Arabi for reliable academic material on Middle Eastern homes. The site gives her well-researched history, proper photography, and unique architectural detail for the individual homes in Babtouma. The timeline gives her accurate dates alongside detailed stories and architectural images that link to the glossary for specific terms, helping her build a deeper understanding of each home.

Khalil, the Heritage Professional, is drawn to Beit el Arabi's history and the preservation it carries for the country. Each house's timeline gives him a dated, factual record, with some entries linking to further credible resources. The timeline also identifies each home's current state, including whether it's currently open to visitors, giving him up-to-date detail.

Caroline, the Explorer, uses Beit el Arabi to look for well documented stories and high-quality images to use in her features. Because the site offers more of a storyline rather than flat history, she's able to find what she needs to curate her work. The photography throughout gives her work proper intentional, curated feel that she is looking for.

Yousef, the Diaspora Returner, comes to Beit el Arabi looking for a way to connect to his country. The timeline unfolds each home's history as a story rather than a dense record. This makes it easier for him to feel connected, especially with the beautifully chosen photos.

User Journeys

Lina is researching old architecture in the Middle East, curious to learn about its history, the commonalities across different homes, and what these buildings look like. She arrives at Beit el Arabi's homepage and selects one of the houses from the house grid. As she scrolls through the timeline, she reads each entry, looks at every photo, and clicks through to the glossary whenever an unfamiliar architectural term appears. By the end of her research, she has a clear picture of the history the homes carry, what they look like, their architectural commonalities, and where they stand today.

Khalil is preparing a briefing on the state of heritage preservation in Damascus and needs credible, up-to-date sources on individual homes. He stumbles upon Beit el Arabi and discovers the many historical houses that still exist in Damascus. While going through each of their timelines, he finds a factual, dated account of the home's history, following links to further credible resources where they're available. He's also able to check the current state of each home and whether it's open to visitors.

Caroline is putting together a feature on hidden architectural gems in the Middle East. She comes across Beit el Arabi and is instantly drawn to it by the homepage. As she goes through each home, she discovers the genuine depth each of them carries. The photography throughout gives her the exact kind of high-quality imagery she is looking for. It also gives her the further opportunity to collaborate with the site's creator directly. By the end, she has her compelling story with the complementary imagery and a working relationship.

Yousef grew up hearing stories from his parents about his family's old neighbourhood. The opportunity to visit never fell into his lap. Searching online for a way to learn more and feel closer, he comes across Beit el Arabi. He selects a home from the house grid and reads through its timeline, drawn in by the history that unfolds and the photography of the home.

Empathy Mapping

Although I created four personas, I decided to proceed with a slightly generic empathy map that could loosely be applied to all four. With empathy mapping we need to consider the shared frustrations and common feelings.

Think & Feel

How can I access reliable information on the historic buildings of Syria?

Where can I find credible and authentic content?

Will I be able to access this content?

Can I trust these resources?

How much of the heritage in Syria is lost?

Say & Do

I can't find reliable sources.

I can't find high-quality images.

It's so difficult to find good-quality content online that is reliable.

So much of the information I find has missing pieces.

Traveling there is so risky.

I need credible and accessible content.

See

Scattered and incomplete information.

Low-quality photos and content.

Generic photos only available.

Most content is only available in Arabic.

Low awareness of the historical culture of Syrian buildings.

Limited documentation of such historical sites.

Outdated and low-quality content.

Pain Points

Frustrated that it's so difficult to access good-quality content these days.

Curious about the history of these homes and where they are today.

Excited to learn more about such a rich culture.

Disappointed at the lack of quality in content.

Hopeful that proper content will come to light soon.

Information Architecture

Beit el Arabi's information architecture combines a hierarchical and matrix-based organization system. The main path for the user is hierarchical: they start at the homepage, which is the house grid, so the user will land directly on an overview of all the homes and then select one, moving them to an individual page. For each individual house page there is a chronological timeline that guides the user from construction to the home's present-day state. Through the timeline there are architectural references that link the user to the glossary page, if they want to look further into a term. Once there, the glossary functions as a matrix system, allowing the user to browse its four categories in whatever order suits them, rather than following one fixed path. The glossary's terms also act as a labeling system, condensing each architectural feature into an English name, Arabic script, an image, and a short explanation. Since the site is relatively small and easy to navigate, I did not include a search function. There is a navigation bar giving access to the site's other pages including About and Contact, where the user can browse as they like.

Design (Visual Delight)

Brand Tone & Intentions

My core intentions when building this project were to preserve, educate, and connect. I wanted to digitally preserve the history and stories of these homes before they're lost to conflict, time, or neglect, and create a centralised platform that celebrates their architectural beauty while connecting people with a shared love of architecture, history, and the Syrian diaspora. When creating the brand tone of this project, I wanted the site to feel welcoming, honest, and respectful to the heritage and culture. I created a mood board to capture the warm tones through calligraphy, tiles, interiors, textures, and everyday life in Damascus.

Colour Palette

Initially, two colour palette options were explored, both built around the intent to carry the warm, earthy tone meant to reflect aspects of a Damascus home. After presenting the options to the class and receiving feedback, the palette chosen was Option 1. This was the palette that I was leaning towards initially because the colours in it represent specific elements of Syria. The teal serves as a primary colour, inspired by the Islamic tile work found throughout these homes, while the terracotta serves as an accent, inspired by the naranj, a bitter orange tree iconic to the streets and courtyards of old Damascus. The remaining colours, brown, beige, and sage, feed into the overall earthy warmth the brand carries. Together, they create a strong visual identity for the website.

Final Colour Palette:



background	headers	accent	accent	headers
#DBD3C2	*#4D7470*	*#565E44*	*#6B2E20*	*#B15F2C*

Typography

Once I chose the topic for my Major Project, I immediately knew which font I wanted to go ahead with. The header font, Volume TC, was chosen early on and stayed consistent through to the final site. I discovered this font from the site by Jason Velazquez, who impressed me by using just one font for all his site's text. It carries a strong structure while still delivering a sense of warmth, suited to Beit el Arabi's subject matter. For the body font, I initially wanted Greycliff CF, but after applying it to the site itself, it felt a bit too modern and rounded. I ended up replacing it with Afacad, which better suited the body text throughout the site.

Page Layout

Early in the design process, I was considering two possible directions for the homepage: conforming to convention with a clear, structured layout and familiar navigation patterns, or challenging convention with something more immersive, such as a map to explore these homes.

The first homepage concept that I explored was a map of the Babtouma neighbourhood, with each house highlighted and clickable to lead the visitor to its dedicated page. The idea aimed at giving the visitor a sense of geography and exploration. However, as I started to hand draw the map, I wasn't happy with the results. Coding the map through AI could have been a different route, but a part of me wanted to add a human touch that was mine to the site. A second concept I explored, and ended up going with, was hand drawing the individual doors of each home, keeping the site personal and creative in a way that felt true to my original intention. It reinforced the project's storytelling intention from the very first interaction, treating each doorway as the entrance into that house's story.

Early Homepage Concept (Map Drawing):



Final Homepage Concept (Illustrated Doors):





For the individual house pages, I was stuck between two layouts for the timeline: vertical or horizontal. At first, I was leaning towards a vertical layout, but I felt it didn't show the images as appropriately as I wanted, appearing too small on desktop. I ended up going with a horizontal layout for desktop, paired with a vertical layout for mobile, to make sure the images could be shown at their best on each device.

Icons

As I was researching and exploring the architecture of the homes, I noticed a lot of similar patterns across all of them. I decided to create a few icons from the decorative details I found and was able to make a geometric star for the tiles and an arched doorway. This was good for me in the long run, because I had a dictionary to pull from as I was building the content and theme. Of the two, I decided to go with the geometric star, and was able to use it consistently throughout the site. It appears on the glossary page as a dropdown indicator for each category and reappears at a smaller scale when the browser is resized to a mobile phone. Towards the end, I decided to use the other icon that I created as a favicon.

Icons:



decorative icon



favicon

Images

For the images used throughout the site, at first a square crop was the initial concept. I ended up choosing the circular crop for stylistic purposes. The circular crop is used throughout every time line entry and glossary entry. This creates a unified visual language throughout the site between the pages.

Cognate Comparison

There are many different sites when it comes to covering homes in Babtouma. Beit el Arabi's visual approach to the topic gives it a unique standpoint. When it comes

to the cognate sites — Archnet, UNESCO, and AKDN — they carry a more extensive approach to history, built for conservationists and heritage professionals rather than a general audience. They don't take a strong visual design approach, operating with the intention of sharing information as clearly and directly as possible. Tourist-focused sites like visitdamascussyria.com lean generic, prioritising promotion over considered design. Beit el Arabi challenges these sites through the visual experience it offers. Its design is built around the intention of delivering information through a curated experience. The warm colour palette, hand-illustrated doors, and consistent photography work together to create a distinct visual identity that no cognate site currently offers.

Firmness (Technical)

Considering the Alternatives

Before settling on WordPress, the main consideration I had in mind was building a basic site through HTML, CSS, and JavaScript with no CMS at all. This would have given me complete control of the code, and it was also the approach I was most familiar with. Given that this is a Major Project for my Master's programme, I decided to go with the challenge of building a custom WordPress theme from scratch. If I had stuck with plain HTML, CSS, and JS, adding content would have been very difficult and time-consuming in the long run, and the content wouldn't have been as organised. I also wouldn't have come out of the programme with a new skill under my belt.

Why WordPress

WordPress was chosen partly because it was recommended in the project brief. I wasn't as familiar with the application as I hoped to be, but I didn't look at that as a stopping point. Building a custom theme wasn't mandatory either, I could have used an existing one, but I chose to build it from scratch for several reasons. First, building a custom theme would give me more control over the website than an existing theme could. This was vital to the site because of the unique design I wanted to include. Second, it offered the strongest learning curve for me as a coder and designer. I knew that if I wanted to continue pursuing website building independently, custom WordPress theme building would be the best skill to develop.

A WordPress custom theme was the most suitable structure for the content itself. Every house profile follows the same structure, which WordPress could handle consistently throughout. This would make it easier in the long run, if the website's content were to increase, adding house profiles would be an easy task without needing to adjust the code.

Domain & Web Hosting

The original title that I had planned for the website was Dar Sham. It roughly translates to "House of Damascus," which I felt would've really encapsulated the whole concept of the site. Unfortunately, the URL www.darsham.com was unavailable and already being used. This led to renaming the project to Beit el Arabi. It still carries the same concept, but in a broader sense, it translates to "Arab Home." So that became the site's final domain, www.beitelarabi.com. In the end, the new name fit the project just as well.

For the web hosting, the platform I went along with was Clook, largely because it was what we used throughout the course and it was what I was most familiar with. My experience with them has been great. The support team is responsive, and the setup is straightforward.

Front-end & Back-end Decisions

The site's backend was built on a custom-built WordPress theme through PHP, CSS, and JavaScript. Overall, the process was a challenge and time-consuming. I knew learning how to get this to function would take me a minimum of one month, so I gave myself the graciousness of two months. PHP handled the dynamic content, pulling in ACF fields for each house profile, while CSS controlled the visual styling and layout. JavaScript managed interactive elements such as the timeline's scroll behaviour and a dark/light mode toggle, switching between colour schemes by adding a class to the root element and swapping the CSS custom properties defined in :root. Responsive design across the site was handled through CSS media queries, most notably switching the timeline from a horizontal layout on desktop to a vertical layout on mobile, and adjusting the navigation menu for smaller screens.

Plugins

Throughout the process of building the website, I discovered some extremely useful plugins. At first the amount of suggested plugins WordPress throws at you can be overwhelming and you definitely don't need all of them. Here are some that I found to be helpful to building my site.

Advanced Custom Fields (ACF)

The plugin that served me the most was Advanced Custom Fields (ACF), used across every content-driven page — the homepage, house profiles, and the glossary. Rather than hardcoding content into each individual page, ACF let me easily define custom fields for each one, which proved very useful in the long run whenever I needed to adjust or change the content.

All-In-One Migration

I decided to build my custom WordPress theme locally and even uploaded the content. Therefore, I needed All-in-One Migration which was used to transfer the site's content from my local environment to the live server.

FileBird

I used FileBird to help keep my images organized throughout the site. Given that I have a lot of images, it felt essential to organization. The default in WordPress would have been to leave all the images in one folder uncategorised.

CookieYes

CookieYes provided the cookie consent notice on the live website. This was recommended to me by our professors.

Wordfence Security

Another plugin that was recommended to us by our professors for security purposes.

Akismet Anti-spam

Akismet Anti-spam was used to protect the site's forms from spam submissions, filtering out automated spam before it could reach my inbox.

Enable Media Replace

Given the number of times I had to resize images across the site, having to re-upload each one individually and manually re-enter its title and alt text became very time-consuming. Enable Media Replace let me swap out an image file directly while keeping its existing title and alt text intact, which significantly sped up the process.

Site Kit by Google

Site Kit by Google was used to connect the website to Google Analytics and Google Search Console, giving me a single place to monitor the site's traffic and performance without needing to check each tool separately.

Yoast SEO

Yoast SEO was used to guide on-page optimisation across the site.

Naming Conventions

As you can see throughout my code, there is a use of classes and IDs. Since each page on Beit el Arabi — the homepage, individual house pages, glossary, and about pages — has a different layout, I defaulted to the use of classes and IDs. I added custom classes and IDs to target specific elements directly, giving me full control to style each page as needed, rather than being limited to one structure. For more static pages, such as About and Accessibility, I was able to edit content directly within WordPress, and inline styling was used for certain words throughout the site through the WordPress editor itself.

Version Control

For version control, I used Git and GitHub throughout the build. This allowed my theme's code to be tracked and saved over time, giving me the reassurance that I could always go back throughout the process. Setting this up from the beginning really saved me when my laptop broke midway through the project. I was able to pick up where I left off on a new device and not lose weeks of work. This was vital to the success of my project due to the backup, because you never really know what can go wrong.

Prototype

Summary of Prior Crits

Throughout the development of this project, there were several crits that took place. Each crit was at a different stage and offered me feedback and reviews. Altogether, I was able to create and reach the final product of where I am today with this feedback.

During the first few stages of the crit, we covered building the direction, brand identity and layouts. At first building a map for the homepage was the main goal. I knew it was ambitious, but the reviewers did respond warmly to it. They did encourage me to go for the non-templated layout but knew that an interactive map would be challenging especially with responsive behaviour. For the individual homepages, I wanted to create a timeline, and they encouraged me to go for a vertical orientation for accessibility reasons. The colour palette and typeface were well received and encouraged because it really fit the personality of the content.

As the crits progressed and we reached the prototype stage, feedback moved to more specific detail. The homepage map at this point was AI-generated — not a final choice, but a placeholder for positioning. It didn't read clearly as a real map, and reviewers recommended further research into real-world map elements. The timeline for individual pages was still a work in progress, but reviewers responded well to the direction and encouraged me to explore animation further. Smaller feedback centred on the glossary page: reviewers liked the Arabic touch but suggested enlarging the images, keeping them in colour, and considering a different layout approach.

By the final crit, the live site was properly reviewed with specific targeted comments. The homepage needed a stronger statement, an additional header icon, and some time-line issues: cropped images at certain widths, unclear mobile scroll ability, and missing hover feedback on clickable elements.

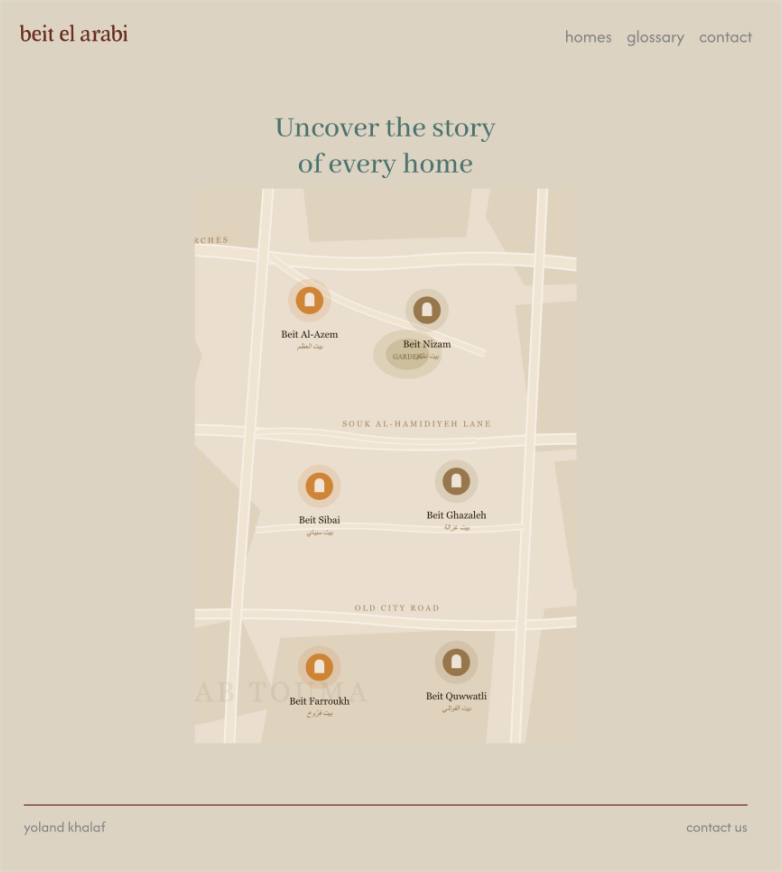
Across all the feedback and development, the homepage ultimately featured six hand-illustrated doors in place of a map. A hand-drawn map was attempted first, but I abandoned it at that stage, I was unhappy with the results. The timeline remained horizontal on desktop, keeping the images large enough to be seen clearly, and changed to a vertical orientation on mobile to suit the smaller screen size. In response to earlier feedback, the cropped images were resolved by scaling them down instead, a visible scrollbar was added to make the timeline's horizontal scroll behaviour obvious on mobile, and hover states with pointer feedback were added to the clickable dots and numbers.

Prototype Demonstration

The initial prototype was built on Figma, and it displayed the homepage, the individual timeline pages for each home, and the glossary. These pages were the core content of the project and would form the user journey. In hindsight, hand-coding the prototype in HTML first would likely have been a more effective approach, as it would have made the eventual transition into WordPress more straightforward. The reason I

fell back towards Figma was due to my unfamiliarity with WordPress overall.

Initial Homepage Prototype:



Initial Timeline Prototype:



Initial Glossary Prototype:



Schedule of Works / Gantt Chart

Creating the Gantt chart helped lay out all the technicalities of the project and the amount of work that was expected to go into it. I broke the project into different phases and mapped each task with a start and end date:

- **Setup** (domain registration and hosting)
- **Design** (wireframes, map design, and mockups)
- **Content** (research, photography, and writing and editing copy)
- **Development** (WordPress local setup, the custom PHP/HTML/CSS theme, the interactive map, and JS features such as dark mode and language toggling)
- **Content Upload** (populating all site content)
- **Testing & Launch** (site deployment, accessibility and QA testing, fine-tuning, and traffic and performance analysis)
- **Reporting** (the prototype crit report, analysis report, SEO/promotion implementation report, and final report compilation)

Implementation

Assembling the Theme, Content, and Design

Once development began, the custom WordPress theme and site's content were built simultaneously. This allowed me to shape the layout around real content as it came in. Learning how to build a WordPress custom theme wasn't as challenging as I thought — there was just a strong fear that I had to push through. The most challenging part of this all was creating the timeline. Creating a horizontal timeline was the trickiest code that I had to tackle.

Learning how to create the timeline, along with its responsive behaviour, involved a combination of techniques. I started by referencing existing examples that I found online of horizontal and vertical timelines. There were many examples online that I was able to pull from, including CodyHouse and FreeFrontend, which each provided a wide range of examples for timeline concepts. Alongside this, I was able to tweak what I needed through AI-assisted coding tools for interaction and layout consistency.

Advanced Custom Fields (ACF) played a key role in bringing all my content together for my homepage, individual timeline pages, and glossary page. It allowed my content to be easily structured and manageable, since there was repeating content across multiple pages. A separate issue that I encountered late on was contrast; the colours needed to be darkened to meet accessibility standards. Fortunately, all my colour values were pre-set as CSS variables in :root from the beginning, meaning a single change applied consistently across the entire site rather than needing to be corrected line by line.

Setbacks and Deviations from Plan

As the project progressed, there were many deviations from the original plan. The first major change was to the homepage. Initially, it was meant to hold a hand-drawn interactive map. It was good that I started creating the map early on, as it meant there was still time to change direction. I began drawing the map on Procreate and wasn't happy with the results. I could have used AI to generate the map instead, but I really wanted to bring my own creative touch to the website. So, I decided to hand-draw six doors, one for each home, to create a stronger individual story for each.

The photography for the project was another setback I had to deal with. The original plan was to shoot the homes in collaboration with a friend, but this became impossible due to political circumstances. This led me to decide to take the photos on my own. I was able to capture some of the homes independently, but due to a family bereavement, I had to stop. I then decided to reach out to some online content creators instead. They were more than happy to share their content, if I credited them where it was due.

Despite these setbacks, I think the project came together very well. I was able to keep my own creative touch throughout, and the photos turned out beautifully, building further on that collaborative goal.

SEO & Promotion Strategy

For search engine optimization, Yoast SEO was used to guide on page optimization across the site. Each individual page was given a focus keyphrase, custom SEO titles and meta descriptions. It ensures that each individual page reflects the specific content of that page rather than relying on generic and broader text. A target set of keywords was set to reflect the project's branding and subject matter. Some words used are:

- Beit el Arabi
- Damascus courtyard homes
- Traditional Damascene homes
- Syrian architectural heritage
- Babtouma, Damascus
- Old City Damascus architecture
- Syrian heritage preservation

The promotion strategy for the website is quite promising because it's live at a time when the country can finally open without restrictions. There is a sense of hope and excitement among the Syrian community to see the country's culture and history shared with no limitation. The promotional approach that I could take with this project breaks down into three options:

Social Media

- As I did for the photography of the site, I was able to reach out and collaborate with someone on social media, specifically Instagram.
- Promoting it throughout Social Media platforms such as Instagram or LinkedIn.

Community

- There is a strong community with a mission to show the world what Syria is.
- I could set up potential collaborations with people locally.

Outreach to Cultural & Heritage Organization

- These organizations could help lend the archive credibility and connect it with audiences already engaged in preserving and promoting Syrian heritage.

Overall, the implementation phase was what really shaped the project to what it is now. From reworking the homepage concept and adapting to unexpected photography constraints, to solving the responsive timeline and shaping a promotion

strategy rooted in Syria's renewed openness. The obstacles that I overcame to build what is live now reinforced the project's core mission: to preserve, connect, and educate the community.

Analysis

Once the site was live, it was important to assess how well it performed. To do this, I used PageSpeed Insights, WAVE, and SEO to measure the site's performance. Through this I was able to identify areas that needed further attention while enhancing its performance.

PageSpeed Insights

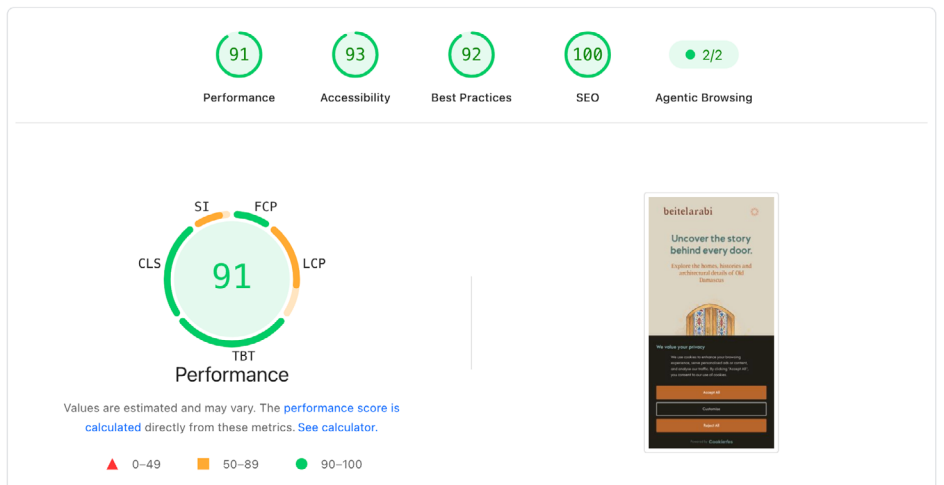
A continuous issue I faced until the end of my project was image sizing; there was an ongoing struggle. I was aware this could be an issue I was going to face due to the large amount of photography and illustration the site carries. Once I ran it through Google PageSpeed Insights and saw a performance score of 70%, I knew that I couldn't leave it at that. I went on adjusting multiple images across the site until I was happy with both the quality of the images and site performance. I wanted to preserve the quality of the photography and illustrations because they were important to the content of the site.

This led to resizing the same image multiple times until I found the balance between quality and performance. It meant I had to re-upload each individual image and manually re-enter the title and alt text each time, which was very tedious considering the number of images the site carries. To streamline this, I installed and activated the Enable Media Replace plugin, which allowed me to swap out the image files alone and keep their existing titles and alt text.

"After all this, I was able to increase my PageSpeed up to 85-88% per page. The ideal target would be 90-100%, but this was very challenging to reach, mainly because of third-party scripts I couldn't fully control and the sheer amount of imagery across the site. The frustrating contradiction was that page performance would go up when I decreased image sizing, but user experience would go down if the image became too small and lost quality. With all the back and forth and effort I put towards image sizing, I think the result I ended up with is good.

Considering the battle that I had with the image sizes, I decided to move on to the other flagged performance issues that were bringing my site down. I found that my Google fonts, specifically Afacad and Tajawal, were creating a render-blocking request that was delaying my site's loading speed. Since I already had Volume TC implemented in my CSS, I decided to add the other two as well. That way, not only would my PageSpeed increase, but my fonts would be consistent in one location rather than having them in two places. So I converted both fonts to .woff2 files and added them as local font-face rules. This eliminated the external request and bumped my PageSpeed up to 91%, removing all the yellows that were a sore sight for the eyes.

Final Page Speed Insights:



Accessibility

WAVE

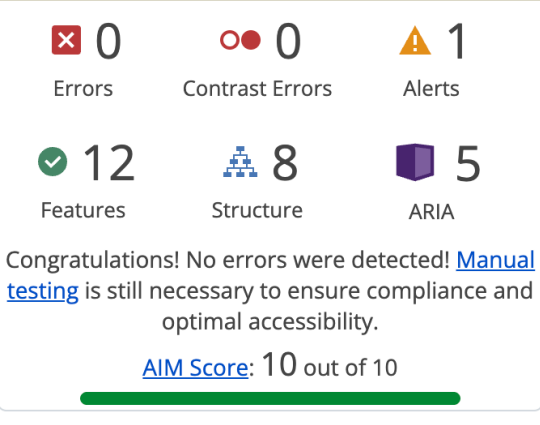
Accessibility was a priority during the project. An issue I detected early on was the contrast levels of my site's colours. This was an unfortunate situation for me, because I really didn't want to change my brand colours at this stage of the project. Instead of changing the colours, I decided that I would simply darken them to meet accessibility standards. The process wasn't so tedious because all my colour values were set as CSS variables in :root from the beginning. It took a lot of playing around with the colours, but it wasn't impossible.

After I fixed the contrast issue, my results were much stronger, sitting at an AIM Score of 9.8 out of 10. A few other alerts were flagged in WAVE, but they were mere suggestions. There was duplicate text on the homepage because of the alt text for the images and the title underneath it. I fixed this by emptying the alt text on the images, since each door already has its name displayed below it. The tool also recognised ten positive accessibility features across the site, reflecting practices such as consistent alternative text usage and appropriate structural markup.

WAVE also picked up a genuine error on my contact page: the form fields for name, email, and message were all missing proper labels. It was a good thing I ran the page through WAVE before moving forward. Since placeholder text disappears when the user starts typing, it isn't reliable for screen readers. I went ahead and added visually hidden <label> elements for each field, that way I was able to keep the visual design intact.

Through all these adjustments, fixing the contrast issue and then resolving the redundant alt text and link alerts, I was able to take my AIM score from 3.4/10 up to a full 10/10.

Final WAVE Score:



Manual Testing

While WAVE is a great tool for catching accessibility issues, it's automated and can't catch everything. I think manual testing, like checking tab order with the keyboard, is just as important. I was concerned this could be an issue for my timelines, given their scrollable, interactive nature, so I made sure to test this myself. Thankfully, users are able to navigate through the timelines using the Tab key and arrow keys without any issues.

One thing I did notice through manual testing was that there was no way for a user to skip past the header on each page. To fix this, I implemented a "skip to content" link, which allows keyboard and screen reader users to jump straight to the main content of the page without having to tab through the header and navigation every time. I think it's important to consider the small accessibility additions we can add to our site to ease their journey.

Results vs. Original Goals

Looking back, I was genuinely shocked by the scores my website returned across these standards when I first started testing. PageSpeed Insights returned a score in the 70% range, and WAVE returned an AIM Score of just 3.4 out of 10. I knew the number of images across the site would be an issue, but I hadn't expected that after already resizing them twice. That I would need to go through the process a third time, but it had to be done. Through this process, I was able to bring my PageSpeed score up to 85% and above across the site's pages.

As for the WAVE score, the fix wasn't technically difficult so much as an internal struggle. I didn't want to change my brand colours at this stage of the project. In the end it worked out, the adjustment brought my AIM score up to a full 10 out of 10, without compromising the overall look of the site or my brand identity.

Conclusion

Success Against the Original Brief

Looking back at the brief I set for myself at the start of this project, I feel confident saying I fully met what I originally set out to do. I am proud of the finished site as well as the overall journey it took to get there.

The first step to the project was deciding which homes to research for this project. With so many historical courtyard homes in Babtouma, Damascus, the houses selected were chosen for their unique history and stories. At the end, some homes proved easier to research than others. Several are still well maintained today, whether as museums, under institutional ownership, or still lived in as private homes. A few of the homes have entire books written about them, while others had far less available. There was an uneven balance in the research behind each of the homes that I chose.

Photography for this site was very vital to the project, and it didn't go as planned. While visiting Syria to photograph the homes myself, my grandfather fell extremely ill and passed away. For a project so rooted in memory, heritage, and connection to my family and place, this loss struck hard. I knew I wouldn't be able to carry the task out alone, so the project turned to collaborating with online content creators, who generously shared their own photography and brought the visual side of the project together.

Another obstacle that I tackled was the homepage. Originally, it was meant to be a map of Babtouma that I would've created myself. As I was drawing out the map, I wasn't so happy with the results. I knew I could have gone with creating it through AI, but it's not the route that I wanted. I wanted an opportunity to explore my creativity. Each home's door was hand illustrated and placed on the homepage, treating every doorway as the entrance into that house's story.

Building the site would probably have been my biggest learning curve academically. I wanted to create the theme from scratch through WordPress. What began as an unfamiliar, intimidating tool became a skill developed to the point of building a fully custom theme independently.

What You'd Do Differently

If I could go back and approach this project again, the main thing I would do differently is start the tasks I was afraid of earlier. Building the custom WordPress theme, for example, was something I put off longer than I needed to simply because it felt intimidating. Once I started, the ongoing journey became rewarding with every skill I learned. Starting earlier would have given me more time to master the skills and learn more about the program. I would also consider skipping the Figma build altogether and hand-coding it in HTML instead. Starting off with HTML would have made the transfer to WordPress easier.

That said, not everything that I would revisit is a mistake. Collaborating with content creators worked out in my favour. They shared beautiful photography that captures the homes in ways that I couldn't have achieved myself with the time that I

had. I couldn't even imagine what the outcome of my site would have been without their contribution. What began as a setback turned into one of the project's strengths, and it gave me the confidence to reach out to others in the future to build the site even further.

Future Plans

Looking ahead, I believe this site has a lot of potential to grow. Syria is currently going through a significant political shift. The country is opening in ways it hasn't been able to for years. The community is ready to share its beauty and history with the world. This feels like a genuinely meaningful moment for a project like this to exist, and I'd like to see it grow alongside that shift rather than stay static as a finished university project.

There are also many curators and content creators online already documenting Syrian heritage, architecture, and culture. There is potential in collaborating with them further to expand the site's archive. The collaboration that came out of this project's photography showed me how much room the site has to grow. I'd like to build on that going forward inviting more contributors, adding more homes to the archive, and continuing to grow this into a genuinely collective record of Syria's architectural heritage.

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