

## UNESCO = Walt Disney ?

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### Abstract

How can ancient cities benefit from the UNESCO world heritage badge and simultaneously avoid becoming a 'Walt Disney' for tourists?

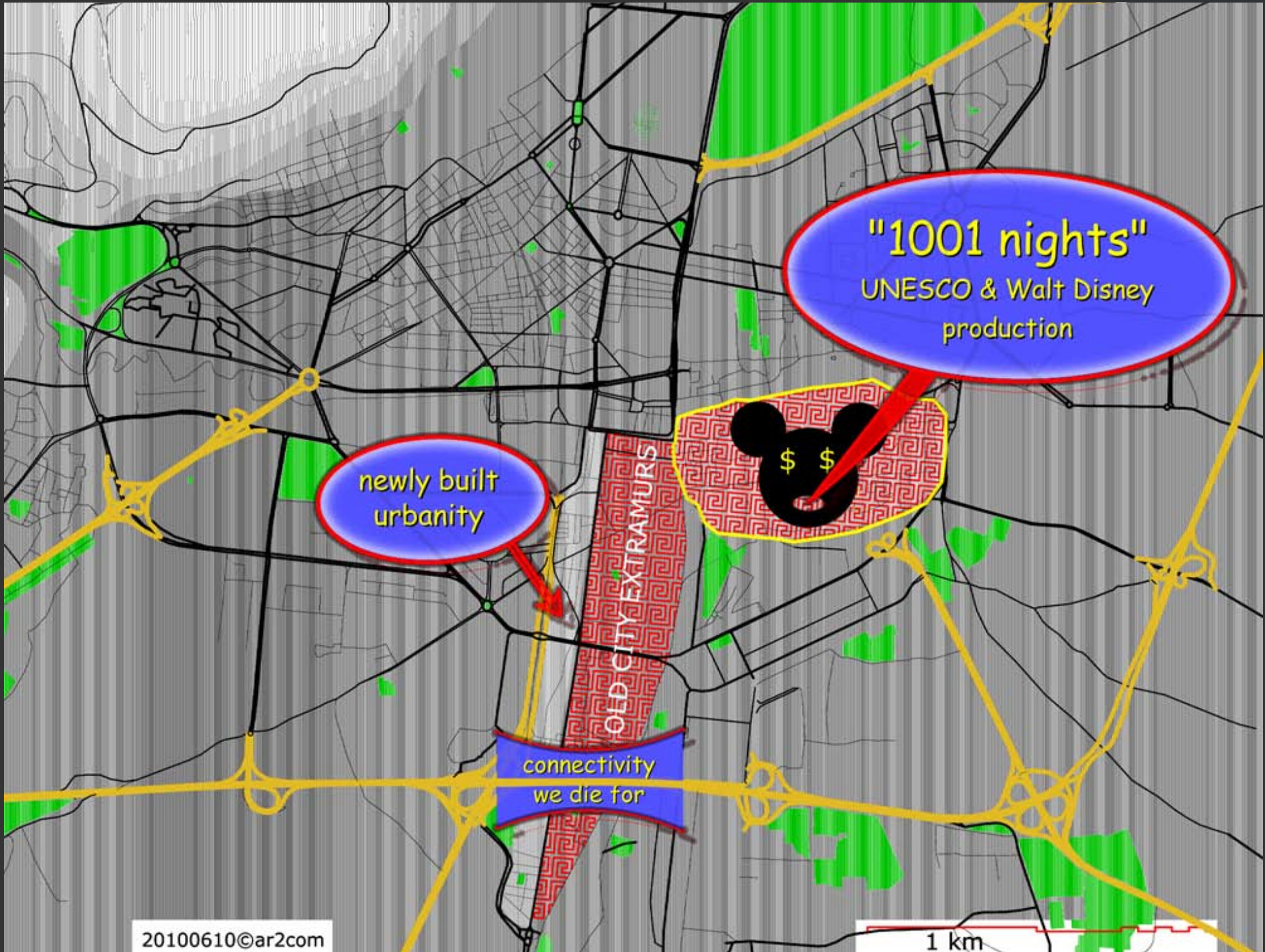
There are fears that the UNESCO world heritage badge is being used to start a marketing campaign, based merely on capitalist standards. The common requirement for a rapid return on investment (ROI), however, leads to rapid development and rules out slow-growing and steady sustainability – and deprives local people of having a say during the city's 'rehabilitation'. In fact, here we don't deal with rehabilitation but with reconstruction similar to a set stage fit to serve photo sessions by tourists.

As to the Walt Disney reference, this was the general concern in an urban design studio at PAR. To simplify the theoretical task we chose the following UNESCO sites: Damascus, Syria, for the winter term 2008 / 2009 and Sana'a, Yemen, for the winter term 2009 / 2010 (still in progress). Understanding is the main base for a sustainable design in foreign cultures: learners – teachers, designers – researchers, locals – professionals, and so on are all communicating directly using all possible web 2.0 achievements. The students learnt how to access research communities and the local Damascene community to work out relevant propositions, which place(d) themselves in between 'urban acupuncture' and 'slow urbanism'.

Our final presentation in Damascus proved this working method ideal and effective.

### Keywords

cultural sustainability, communication, slow urbanism, urban acupuncture, web 2.0, international collaborations



## Situation

Syria's capital, Damascus, is the oldest continuously lived-in city in the world and is in danger of 'Disneyfication'. With its five-star hotels and so-called 'VIP pockets', the locals are being driven out in droves. These new lifestyles are being established in the old parts of the city without regard for the capacity of basic services such as sewage, waste collection, water supply and traffic management.

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In fact, here we don't deal with rehabilitation but with reconstruction similar to a long-term film coulisse: concrete with a curtain-type historicizing facade. The influx of new and wealthy people has had a staggering impact on the grown environment and everyday lives of local people. To regard the old city as a theme park renders it increasingly superficial and 'temporary' and not at all in keeping with its true character of venerability befitting its 5,000 years of existence.

So what would be an appropriate design for building an environment able to safeguard the soul and atmosphere of the old city instead of creating a perfect reconstruction of the former outer skin, which then turns out to become a too-tight corset unable to adapt to modern life?

## What does modern life look like in the Middle East and Damascus?

'Art' is rediscovered in Arab countries - by the West and by the East. For the West it is the ornament, for the East it is divided into two main streams, 'art as an investment' and 'art as a necessary expression'. The tragedy of the 11th of September initiated amongst others a cultural revalorization of the Arab world. Art exhibitions from 2002 on presented intellectuals and artists alongside terrorists, sheiks and politicians. A vital network on the global art market opened minds and opportunities.

Guggenheim in Dubai and Louvre in Abu Dhabi fit the mainstream philosophy of capitalist cultural production in the Middle East well - supported by Western branding. Of course, they will support some artists in these regions, but the speed is leading to superficial results. Money is connected to power and makes it hard to believe that freedom of opinion will be established.

The Egyptian artist Sherif El-Azma describes the situation as follows: "There are two systems in the Near East: The first is the official system of the ministry of culture, which gives support, but it is impossible to work with, since corruption dictates the sector. And



references. But in Damascus as well one can find the main stream museum with an online index of auction and art fares like the Ayyam gallery in the Mezze district (new Damascus), where art is understood as an investment not a as a necessary reflection of life. The customers here are mostly Europeans, Americans and Emirates as well as Syrians living in exile. The Four Seasons hotel serves as a branch for permanent extra exhibitions.

The actual zeitgeist is to be found in the old city of Damascus, the UNESCO part of the city. Mustafa Ali's gallery is the most well known. But actually there are 17 galleries offering a wide variety of quality and style: from sculpture to calligraphy, to paintings and video art – all forms of 'contemporary expressions'. In October 2008 young Syrian artists were promoted in the Kozah Art gallery; workshops for youngsters were organized in the old city by the artist themselves. The most important thing regarding the UNESCO and urban design is that many of these galleries are in well restored Damascene courtyard houses.

## A new brand for the old town?

Figure 2: 'a new brand for the old town' – Syria : Damascus : Old City. >>>

Confronted with the Damascene zeitgeist, the 23 students involved were asked to brand mark the old city by developing an urban design that would fit the actual needs of a contemporary lifestyle in the old city. The course's philosophy was to propose urban design solutions by means of abstraction of the cultural and local situation and combine it with a sustainable attraction for tourists. How is it that a 5,000 year-old well-functioning habitation with international exchange/trade structures should no longer work?

## The Old City: Walt Disney versus Modern Life

The main problem of the old city is said to be the structure which is non-applicable to modern life. The argument concerns floor space per family and changing family structures. The Damascene houses, famous for their open space around the courtyard, are apparently quite modern: this implies the freedom of free-flowing open space that we discovered only last century. The climate in these spaces has been optimized over centuries. This knowledge should be kept and adequate adaptations should be developed.

The narrow streets are not suitable for car traffic, of course, because it is a well designed pedestrian zone, a fundamental element of modern urbanism. So, there is nothing wrong with the structure, it just needs some smart transformation.

Hafsia, a former Jewish quarter in the Medina, the old city of Tunis, is one of the examples that show it works. The transformation process of the run-down area started in the 1970s. We can now see that the area is well-adapted to the surroundings. Both





even if the quality of the materials and the execution are quite appropriate, and testify to a very effective site implementation management, these important works suffer from a uniform and sometimes insensitive design that do not cope in many cases with the internationally established conservation requirements.”<sup>iv</sup>

Conformity creates superficiality and makes spontaneous undertakings of locals very difficult. These spontaneous undertakings can be found in the quite different residential areas in the second or third row, where still some local handicraft and commerce can be found. The inhabitants here vary from refugees with very little money to average, middle income residents. The majority of these inhabitants have too little money to make any convenient changes instead, they are subdividing the Damascene houses without help resulting in a crucial, disrespectful treatment of the old housing structure. The phenomena of subdividing large wealthy housing units into one-room units is the same as experienced for example in Hafsia, Tunis.

The average Syrian inhabitant might have more money, but still not enough for a suitable design. The installed help desks in the old city, that could offer not only financial support, are not present in the minds of the inhabitants. Within these residential areas the 17 art galleries, local cafés, hammams, and educational institutions can be found, but also some VIP-pockets, designed to make wealthy people leave their money there. UNESCO counted 98 restaurants (of which 34 opened in the period 2005-2007) and 46 hotels at the end of 2007.<sup>v</sup>

A good example for the ‘art as investment’-branch invading the old city and showing how it goes together with the ‘Disneyfication’ is the cultural centre on the straight street, its structure is completely made of concrete which will port the film coulisse perfectly to sell a ‘Thousand and One Nights’-atmosphere on high-quality photo paper to the wealthy tourists. The construction has now been stopped by UNESCO.

Figure 5: Conformity of the Straight Street. >>>

The importance is to differentiate between sustainable and fast investment, because ‘some’ investment is needed in the old city of Damascus to prevent it from decaying. Decay is not only due to inappropriate care and poor economic conditions, but also to emptiness mainly in the Jewish quarter in the south-eastern part within the walls.

The infrastructural problem of water supply and sewage systems which date back to the Ottoman and French periods has to be resolved. One point is the inaccessibility to

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Daniele Pini (WHC consultant), Didier Repellin (ICOMOS expert), Franca Miglioli (UNESCO/WHC) in the UNESCO report 06/2008.

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Daniele Pini (WHC consultant), Didier Repellin (ICOMOS expert), Franca Miglioli (UNESCO/WHC) in the UNESCO report 2008



a continuous water supply throughout the whole day for the inhabitants of the old city due to abusive use by the hotels and restaurants. The Directorate of Old Damascus has started finally to improve the canalizations in the Via Recta and four other streets. Future yet necessary works should completely supply a working canalization for incoming and out-going water, so that the ground can dry out. Citrus trees in the courtyard houses, which absorb the humidity, could aid this process. If not the Damascene courtyard houses will continue decaying due to the capillary reaction in the old adobe walls. To be smart, electrical networks could be put underground at the same time. But that is something functional, solutions are already found and have to be fulfilled. A more complex task is the urban environment, which needs to be redesigned to suit local needs and to redirect the wrong evolutions of the 'Disneyfication' process.

One important first step would be to make the locals rediscover their habitat by visiting well-restored existing examples and to communicate how to undertake proper renovations.

At the end of 'Walt Disney versus Modern Life' there is to add that this is not a particular Syrian or Arab problem. All over the world, UNESCO sites have turned into open air museums, theme parks or other tourist attractions which bring only little money to the locals and many big changes to their former environments. Damascus and Sana'a are given as examples for design using existent, realistic environments.

### Work Philosophy in Class of the Urban Design Studio

Communication with local people was maintained throughout the entire design process, aided by blogs, social media, and emails. PAR >planning and building in Outer-European regions< at the TU Darmstadt, Germany, is trying to sensitize the students to understand and implement integral urban design in foreign cultures. The fact of designing in a foreign, not so familiar culture helps abstract the design process and provokes the students to follow their own design beliefs. They have to adapt to new rules - may they be based on geography, culture, climate, materials, etc.

Abstraction and common sense lead to an explicate attitude to be discussed with the locals in order to avoid an urban design mainly based on traditional prejudices - from our culture towards the foreign culture and as well within the foreign culture trying to present them to us.

The students now had to propose an urban design which prevents the old city from becoming a dead museum and makes it a vivid district of the city. In terms of urbanism they had to combine housing with the actual artistic and cultural movement in Damascus. Inspired by the Shadi Ghadirian series 'like every day' we named it 'a new brand for the old town'. The results of the urban design studio are presented in the form of videos on the DVD available on the web at [www.damascus.par-darmstadt.de/dvd](http://www.damascus.par-darmstadt.de/dvd).

To get to know the foreign culture the students tried different approaches shown in three catalogues (as well on the DVD):

- »Five Elements: Some >spontaneous< definitions of the elements water, air, green, light, and material.
- »Analyses: Some >profound< approaches into the Syrian history, Damascene culture, and urban structure.
- »Expressions: Some >intuitive< reactions to Damascus aiming to connect the old and the new.

Key words and phrases such as 'local culture', 'Arab design and urbanism', 'urban acupuncture', 'communicative urban design' and 'slow urbanism' were discussed and analysed during the course. Finally, the urban design proposals were presented via video performances in the Kozah Art Gallery in the old city together with Amjad Alrez, the old city mayor, various other professionals, the University and local inhabitants. The discussion continues via social media. Some graduates of the Damascus University are now participating in our Sana'a project.

We chose a video presentation for each project, since we wanted to open a discussion on them. We couldn't know what language skills to expect; images/sounds/plans are more universal. The Kozah Art gallery was an ideal place to present it, not only due to the fact that it is placed in the middle of the old city, but it is one example of a good restoration of a traditional Damascene house which suits Samer Kozah's modern lifestyle well. We and the locals were impressed by the scenery of our presentation. There was already one built example of what the students were asked to design.

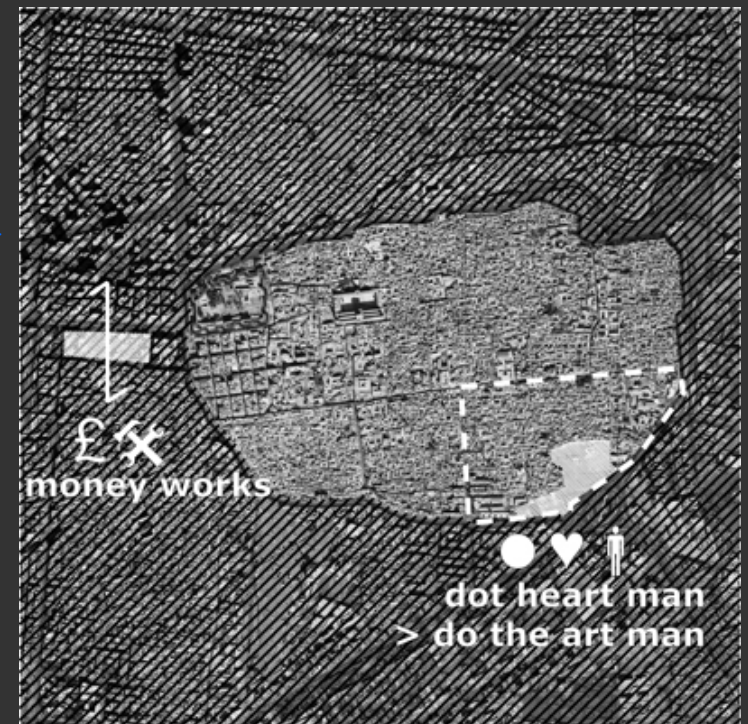
## Urban Design Proposals

Figure 6: the two urban design areas to be planned by the students >>>

The students had two options for their design project: £\$ = 'money works' west of the souk area within the walls. The area today is a parking slot, but its delicate position within the urban structure deserves a better use. As this area connects new Damascus and the old city the students could develop conceptions for contemporary uses, adapting the old urban fabric.

The other area is in the Jewish district, the one with the most empty houses and the most galleries. The task here was ●♥♫ = 'dot heart man > do the art man'. Here, the urban fabric exists and the students had to find ways to improve it.

For each of the areas, a project is presented: "Old City in New Bloom" by Humberto Sarabia, Julia Wiengarten, Leonie Plänklers and Catherina Schuster, and "Heart of Damascus" by Bettina Dobschal, Isabell Schreiter, Nelly Castillo and Hannah Winkelmann.







The structure is strengthened by key buildings like a hammam, a library, a women's centre, and a cultural centre. In addition to the key buildings, four pocket parks each attracting different ages and moods of people offer for example a calm place or some active, sportive interaction. Housing has to be done by the inhabitants themselves.

In a local agency the inhabitants can inform themselves about the building catalogue, design guidelines by the students on how to build a module. Local craftsmen and the inhabitants can come together to discuss and plan the modules, thus the area is growing step by step. Because of its open docking structure, the modules can be easily recycled or re-used.

What can be foreseen is a hard time for the local agency dealing with corruption. Will they stick to the building catalogue? And is the building catalogue really suitable in future years? The key-buildings are too many for the local needs in the beginning. Unused built matter is always a bad motivation for a district. The pocket parks could help to flood the district with the working people during the day from the surrounding districts. Positive outcomes have already been experienced with pocket parks in Aleppo.

## Concluding Remarks

Local culture and community spirit make sustainable modification, since no one wants to destroy their native soil. A community, a group of individual people, has neither the power nor the money to make fast (superficially rational) changes to an existent structure. The return on investment (ROI) has no relevance to the locals, since their investment is little money but a lot of time and culture.

What they are looking for is to better their everyday life in the long term. This kind of sustainability conforms to local identity which in the future – when we globally will live, buy, eat, and produce all the same – will return investment, but in a sustainable manner. A local identity can only be created by the locals! Nevertheless, they can be criticized or reviewed or activated by externals. A sustainable urban design should activate the locals; once designed or built, the locals should be able to interact.

The overall conclusion about web 2.0: Communication via social media and blogs encourages a non-hierarchical work flow. The "anything goes of www" forced us to discuss and question the info gathered and trained us to filter the good/correct information. Our final presentation in Damascus proved this working method ideal and effective. We were right on target – in Damascus!

There is an own webspace on [www.damascus.par-darmstadt.de](http://www.damascus.par-darmstadt.de)! Visit it to get more detailed info about the students work or watch some videos or even order the DVD.

## Acknowledgements

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The international group of participant students was one of the things that motivated me most. The results on the DVD will show you why. I would like to thanks to the PAR Institute for its whole infrastructure and Lauren Hammond for her editing remarks.

Participant Students: nicolas bonges (de), miriam ballesteros sels (es), andreas brück (de/mx), nelly castillo aviles (mx), maria emanuel castro da silva (pt), anna damm (de), julian della morte (de/ch), bettina dobschal (de), aritz garcia de cortazar arriola (es), enaam jarjis (de/ir), mohammad aladin koujan (de/sy), naghmeh malek (de/ir), tamar makharadze (ge), alessa meier (de), julio obregon zepeda (mx), leonie plänklers (de), humberto sarabia (mx), isabell schreiter (de), markus schütz (de), catherina schuster (de), leonie stützle (de), julia wiengarten (de), hannah winkelmann (de).

Finally, "big respect" goes out to all those people collaborating in creative commons projects. We are appreciating your open source productions! We do share alike and it is free for non-commercial use: [www.damascus.par-darmstadt.de](http://www.damascus.par-darmstadt.de).

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