

National Museum of Aleppo*

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Abstract. This paper presents the history, current situation, and ongoing projects on the collection from the National Museum of Aleppo (Syria), sketching the history of its collection and the changing role of the museums in the past century. When museums face periods of conflict and destruction, not only their primary role to preserve heritage is challenged, but also the bond to the local community is severed. The National Museum of Aleppo is a perfect example in this matter: established under the French protectorate, rearranged by the Syrian government at the end of the 60s, it experienced a flourishing period, the violent conflict, a partial reopening, and the earthquake. Its collection, that was never looted thanks to the efforts of the museum staff and the DGAM, has been damaged by shelling, has been in great part taken out from showcases, brought to safe deposits, and still not available to the public. Given this situation intervention to the collection and to the structure needs to embed the recent events and aims at reinstalling a new bond between the community and its cultural heritage.

Keywords: Museum Studies, Syrian Archaeology, Conflict areas.

1 Background

1.1 Museums' Role and Definition

In Western cultures, museums began to exist in the 17th century CE based on private collections of ancient artefacts, they enlarged and increased in the 17th – 18th centuries. Their first definition as “Wunderkammer” or public collections suggests that they were strongly related to the individual criteria, interests and knowledge of a single person, family or royal institution that began the collection and at a given point decided to open it to the public in order to show their “mirabilia” [2]. The main aim of the first large museums during the 19th century, inheriting it from the previous experience, was to instill a feeling of wonder, as the German definition suggests, in the audience given by the exotic, out of the ordinary, and foreign features of the artefacts. Even if the concept of collections goes beyond the western world, the public museum seems to be a western product exported during the colonial period [34], i.e. in different moments, both in western and in eastern Asia.

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Its definition changed from the 19th century, from being in 1946 “all collections open to the public”, to “a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public”.

In Prague, on 24 August 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM has approved the proposal for the new museum definition: “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing” [18]. Thus, it is not a one-way communication (from the institution to the public) but a dialogue that uses the exposed objects to convey exchange. It is also obvious that museums fulfil their function collecting, interpreting and exhibiting “heritage”: regardless of the ownership of this heritage [17], the material culture preserved in the museums is the reason why these dialogue spaces exist.

1.2 Museums in conflict areas

Numerous events of looting and destruction of museum buildings and their collections over the last hundred years have shown how much the museum has in fact become a non-secondary victim of war damages. Museum buildings are the target of terrorist attacks and of intentional plundering and destruction. They suffer the bombing of the city, the lack of control, and the consequent political instability provided by conflict. Being a public building that hosts materials considered valuable also from an economic point of view, a museum located in a conflict area is the target for antiquity dealers and common thefts; national museums, being a symbol of the cultural heritage of a country, can also become the target for intentional destruction and cultural cleansing. Examples from Afghanistan, i.e. Kabul Museum during the Soviet-Afghan war in the 90s [31] or from Baghdad [15] are the most famous one, however this phenomenon is widespread and common and it affects all war zones and all museums from national to small local ones (i.e. the 2023 looting of the Sudan National Museum in Kartum). Since 1954, with the Secretary-General’s Bulletin on Observance by United Nations Forces of International Humanitarian Law, the UN force is prohibited on attacking cultural heritage sites, including museums [19], the New Policy on Cultural Heritage (2001), the concept that pillaging and destruction of cultural heritage, including the museums, are war crimes has been reinforced setting them in connection with the crimes against humanity. These statements do not prevent looting and destruction, but at least provide a legal frame of intervention during and after the conflict in order to restore collections and “re-exhibit” the artefacts. It is however true that all post conflict interventions carried out in the museum should decide if they aim to erase the looting actions (restore) or embed this in a new story telling.

In addition, other actions should be taken into consideration, not because, as the one described above, destroy the cultural heritage, but because they disrupt and somehow affect the role of the museum during and after the conflict. All measures that try to prevent museum looting and destruction are somehow interrupting the role of the

museum as a space for interaction and exchange: museum are preventively closed, reinforced, fortified; artefacts are removed from showcases, packed in boxes and sometimes removed from the museum in order to be stored in safer places; large artefacts are covered, hidden, protected with sandbags, wooden frames and whatever materials are easy to be found; museum buildings are used as shelters, installations in the museum are reemployed for everyday use. All these actions, that are carried out for the good and the preservation of the material heritage, still may affect the museum's role and its museography in a post-conflict situation.

2 Museums, cultural heritage, and identity in Syria

The earliest scientific archaeological research projects in the region were the German excavations located at Zincirli (1888) and Tell Halaf (1899), and in the English excavations at Karkemish (1876),¹ with the well-known aim to deliver many important "pieces" for museum collections in Berlin (Tell Halaf Museum, Vorderasiatisches Museum) and London (British Museum).

After the First World War with the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916) and the Sévres agreement (1920) both in place, Syria came under a French control. In 1920, Chamornard explains that scholarly opinion felt that local museums were needed in the country to create a bond between the local population and their antiquities. A bond, which the French saw as completely absent blaming looting and illicit digging on this ignorance [7]. They saw the creation of two centralized museums and a third regional one in the "new" country as an impelling need: calling for one Museum in Beirut dedicated to ancient art, one in Damascus dealing with Classical and Arabic art and a third regional one in Adana. In 1920, the museum in Beirut consisted of sixty pieces located in a hall of the Prussian deaconess. The museum in Damascus had its starting core in the Arab Academy at Damascus, which was founded in 1919, and first homed in the madrasa al-'Adiliya. It started to collect art objects during the same year, choosing objects "which made Syria great" and were borrowed or donated by wealth "patriotic" Syrian families. It was only in 1924 that this museum of the Arab Academy at Damascus was called the National Museum of Damascus, and was moved to a building near the Sultan Sulayman Mosque in 1936 [30, 35].

During this period, the journal "Syria" (1920) was founded with the aim of promoting the art and antiquities of Syria and publicize Syrian art from every period. A new antiquity law was drafted (1920) and issued (1923). A Service des Antiquités et Beaux Arts was constituted (1919) for both Syria and Lebanon [26]. French cultural politics during its mandate on the one hand promoted what they thought it was a process of acculturation, the "*mise en valeur*" of the cultural heritage [24], on the other fostered the nationalistic idea of using cultural heritage as a mean to reinforce the identity of a nation that did not exist before. Several small local archaeological museums were opened during this period, e.g., Lattakia (1929) and Tartus (quoted in 1930).

¹ Although two of the three sites are located in Turkey just on the other side of the border, they are considered geographically strongly related to the Syrian cultural sphere [36]

The French cultural policy and the administrative infrastructure they built in the country had a strong impact on the country also after the constitution of the independent Arab Republic of Syria (1949): the *Direction Générale des Antiquités* became *la Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées (DGAM)* in 1951, and a new Antiquities Law was drafted in 1963 [16]. The two main national museums were enlarged: new wings were added in 1956 and 1975 to the Damascus archaeological museum. Hama (1956) in the 'Azm palace, Deir ez-Zor (1974 renewed in 1996), al-Raqqa (1981), and Idlib (1989). Most included, besides the pre-Classical and Classical collections, ethnographic sections, which proclaimed their aim of bringing archaeological data and the region's recent history closer together [20] basically following the same program started by the French, i.e. teaching the communities to accept and protect their archaeological heritage as part of the "Syrian" tradition and culture.

In the catalog of the Canadian exhibition in 1993, Najah al Attar (Syrian Minister of Culture from 1976 to 2000), highlighted the remarkable growth of fieldwork in the country and the "development" of archaeology in Syrian universities, both of which would potentially produce a better awareness and understanding of Syrian cultural heritage [8]. She expressed the same sentiment three years later in the introduction to the catalog of the exhibition organized by the European Community and the Archaeological Museum in Damascus: joint archaeological projects should be supported in search for common cultural roots [22]. In 1999, the Minister of Culture remained on the same path, attributing Syria's archaeological remains as an example of world heritage, again emphasizing the role played by Arab countries in the birth of civilization and in its expansion to the West [14]. According to her, Syria exported and co-organized these sorts of exhibitions to bridge the gap between different worlds and to promote understanding. While there was no declaration connecting cultural heritage with national identity, abandoning the path traced by the French, all statements seemed to refer to a common "Arab" identity, of which Syria was a part. Thus, although the Syrian government has been supporting local archaeological research since the 1960s, welcoming new excavations, building new museums, adding ethnographic section to archaeological museums, it did not explicitly use for a nationalist agenda, as had happened in Iraq, cf.[4].

Only during the recent conflict in Syria and the consequent intentional destruction of artefacts and sites, the government begun to describe local cultural heritage as belonging to Syrians alone, representing the Syrian collective memory and its multifaceted history.² In a conflict situation as the Syrian one, the role of cultural heritage shifted from being the representation of the Arab world, to symbolize the nation in an effort to keep the country united and present the government as the protector of the cultural heritage against other groups that aimed at destroying it.

² Abdulkarim in an interview published in Borghese [5]. Cf. also [29]

3 The National Museum of Aleppo

3.1 From a storage facility to the “National Museum”

Based on the Sèvres agreement, the French planned to include Cilicia in their Mandate of Syria, and the construction of a regional Museum in Adana was planned as part of the cultural politics for governing Syria: it was intended to house the pieces collected by the Colonel Normand and the French army in Cilicia [23]. Because of the French agreement with the Young Turks (1921) and the reestablishment of the Turkish border just south of the Taurus and Amanus mountains (1922), this project was never accomplished. Only then French mandate decided to design a third museum (after Damascus and Beirut) in Aleppo. All excavations in northern Syria such as Tell Ahmar, Ugarit, Tell Halaf and Hama started to send their pieces to Aleppo.

Until 1925 these pieces were stored in the rooms of a local boys' high school with no public access. In 1926 the Archaeological Museum of Aleppo was officially founded and located in the Djemilieh structure (1926-1930), but due to lack of space it did not open to the public, so basically it was not a museum but rather a storage facility for the archaeological excavations. In 1924 the al-Naoura palace was built where large gardens were planted directly on the dried bank of the Queiq river. The building was supposed to host the meeting of the House of Representatives [12], became the residence of general Gaston-Henri Billotte until 1926. This building was chosen to host the collections in 1931 and was soon opened to the public and accessible until 1959, when the collections were temporarily moved in order to allow the new construction of museum where it is still located [10, 11, 25]. The necessity to have a larger structure to host the ever-growing collection of the museum was only one of the factors that brought to the decision to dismantle the Ottoman building and replace it with a new modern structure, in addition to that the fact of dismantling a residence symbolizing the French colonial period and a monument to a French general was an integral part of Syrian internal politics at the end of the 50s [12].

The new modernist structure was built according to the winner plan of an international contest carried out in 1956/7; its construction begun in 1961 and the plan included large underground storage rooms dug directly into the former riverbed as well as a second building for the offices of the antiquity department of the DGAM. The Museum opened in 1969, its museography followed both a topographic and chronological order, grouping artefacts and installation according to the site and arranging the halls following an approximately chronological order. It basically reproduced the same cultural-historic concept that was introduced in the first arrangement [25] but including many more artefacts gathered from excavations over the years. The main issue that raised already during the construction of the new building was the presence of water in the underground rooms, clearly coming from underground spring related to the Queiq river. This problem was controlled through the installation of three water pumps under the floor of the underground facility that would prevent the flooding of the storage.

The building upheld its role throughout the whole 20th century, ranking as one of the most important museums in Syria and representing a key building for the city of Aleppo, where not only the second largest collection of pre-classical artefacts in Syria

was kept and displayed, but also serving as a vital structure able to attract tourists, house conferences and temporary exhibits. Its large front courtyard open to the public was—and, in part, still is—an open park with sculptures where Aleppinians and tourists could stop and rest, and its collection clearly mirrored a feature typical of the city of Aleppo: a place where different religious and ethnic groups lived together, building a unique and multifaceted community. Although visitors' numbers for the museum are not available, the museum's visit was one of the usual stops in every tourist route in a touristic market that registered a 500% increase in number of visitors from 1999 to 2011 [6].

3.2 The Museum during the conflict

The museum closed to the public in 2011/12; in October 2012 with the ongoing conflict in Aleppo and the Saad Allah square bomb attack that damaged its windows and showcases, the DGAM decided to remove all small artefacts from the exhibit and store them in a safer place, first inside the museum itself, then at the University of Aleppo (2013) and, later, when the situation in Aleppo was worsening, in the National Museum in Damascus. These operations were carried out with the help of Aleppinian volunteers on the first stages of packing³ and with the invaluable help of the museum staff during the whole process: they risked their lives to bring the artefacts to Damascus and to control the museum itself. At the same time the country and the city were experiencing battles and conflict on the ground, power and water shortages,⁴ absence of food and provisions. From 2013 to 2019 the museum remained a closed building, accessible only to the staff on what had become a frontline between two sectors of the city controlled by opposing groups.

The museum collection still hosted the large, monumental artefacts that could not be transported to Damascus, such as large statues, architectural and funerary installations that were provided with provisional protection from shelling and bombing [1, 13], so that no monuments were visible from outside, and even its iconic entrance with copies of monumental statues from Tell Halaf was protected with sandbags and completely sealed. During this period no connections between the museum and the local community existed, it kept its function of protecting the archaeological heritage that was left in it, but its social function was completely absent.

³ The first packing activities carried out by local community members with the local museum staff gave to all participants a sense of community and involvement in protecting the heritage. The documentary movie "The Oath of Cyriac" includes several interviews with the museum staff who worked during these years for the safeguard of the collection.

⁴ During the water shortages that affected the city several inhabitants used the water that kept flooding the underground spaces of the building (personal communication D. Baslan).

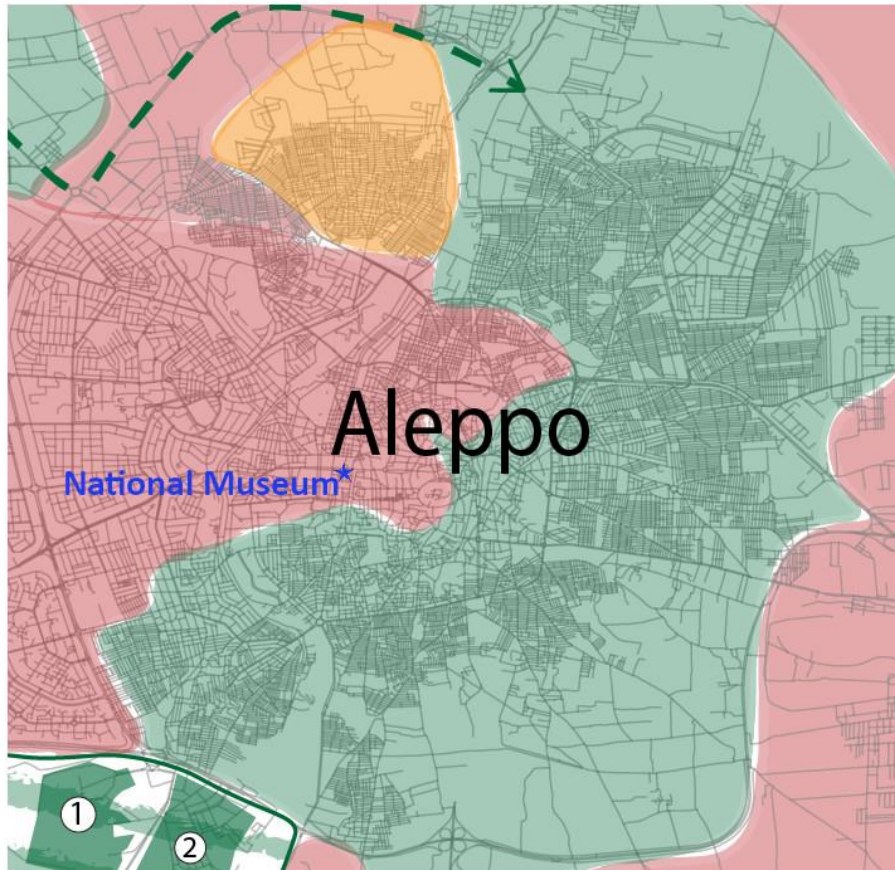


Fig. 1. Urban area of Aleppo as of 31 August 2016. In green the area controlled by the “rebels” in red the ones controlled by the government. Basic map taken from [32], In blue the location of the building of the National Museum, in the government controlled area, but very close to the frontline.

4 The Post conflict scenario

4.1 The torn city

After the conflict ended in Aleppo in 2016, the city was heavily damaged, with 30% of the old town completely destroyed [33] and the population changed: refugees and exchanged prisoners from all neighboring villages fled into the town, large groups of Aleppinians left the city during the conflict. These movements caused a profound

disruption in the social composition of the local community.⁵ In fact not only Aleppo population shrunk to approximately 35% of its population in 2011 [21], but its composition also changed: artisans, traders, shop owners moved their affairs and their lives in areas where it was still possible to work, being replaced by refugees seeking protection in the city. Most of these refugees stayed in Aleppo either because their hometown and villages were and are still under the control of other groups (as the Afrin valley) or because their villages lack any infrastructure and suffered major damages. These are the new Aleppinians and they provide a completely new social face of the city itself. In addition, the major religious/ethnic groups that made Aleppo before the conflict, such as Sunnis, Circassians, Kurds, Alawis, Christians and Armenians, are now still represented in the city but with different proportions than those of 2011.



Fig. 2. 2019 view of the buildings outside the entrance to the citadel at school drop-off time.
©Aleppo project

Since 2017 several NGOs and foundations both national (Syrian Trust for Development) and international (Aga Khan Trust for Culture, UNDP) as well as local institutions (DGAM) planned and, in part, carried out several restoration and rehabilitation projects on the city's cultural heritage [9] targeting the monuments that were considered the most relevant ones according to the statutes and aims of each institution. The reopening of the National Museum in Aleppo in 2019 was one among these.

⁵ Many damage assessment reports are available on the city of Aleppo, cf. [37] also using remote documentation. Most recent publication on social composition and world heritage is presented in [3]

As the war progressed, Syria entered an economic crisis which worsened in 2019, primarily due to the Lebanon crisis and subsequently to the Cesar Act. Lebanon was considered the main intermediary in relations between Syria and the external world starting from the 1950s, especially in reference to the sector banking, as it was the place where Syrian businessmen and private individuals deposited their savings and purchased dollars [38]. However, in 2019 Lebanon is forced to face an economic and financial crisis: banks have started to limit the sale of dollars, the price of US currency rose on the Lebanese foreign exchange market and the accounts in the Lebanese banks were blocked. This crisis affected imports of primary (wheat) and industrial (raw materials) goods. In 2020 the Cesar Act, went into effect imposing coercive measures on trade and imports. The expected post conflict economic recovery never happened reducing the operability in cultural heritage projects to few international actors and mainly local national institutions sometimes in competition with each other.

4.2 The reopening of the museum

Thanks to UNDP in conjunction with the DGAM and with the financial support of Japan, in 2017-19 a large part of the debris in the museum area was removed, the entrance was restored along with the Prehistoric and the Mari Halls (two out of the eight exhibition halls), and half of the roof insulated, more than 2/3 of the building was and is still left without supplies. Most importantly, no restoration has been carried out on any of the sculptures damaged by the war; they are still scattered in the partially abandoned halls.



Fig. 3. November 2019, official reopening of the Museum with international guests ©Aleppo project

Museography remained unchanged from the original 1961 plan, few artefacts were brought back from the storage in Damascus, the flooding problem in the underground storage facility remained unsolved, the other six exhibition halls were left in a post-conflict state exposing the monumental sculptures as well as thousands of artefacts rescued from the flooded storage and kept in there to the action of weather and animals. Most part of these monumental structure were and still are a landmark of the museum, representing the core of the collection and demonstrating the rich past specifically of the Aleppo region. Sites located in northeast (Tell Brak) or in southeast Syria (Mari) have been chosen among the most representative of the national history in the newly restored exhibition halls; they however show the cultural heritage of regions, where the governmental control is very weak or almost absent and with no the connection to the city and its cultural heritage. However, the reopening fulfilled a symbolic purpose that includes both politics and society: reopening the second museum of Syria in a city that underwent such extended damages on the one hand surely provided a sort of “new start”; keeping the museography intact gives a sense of normalization of the functions of the city; opening the halls to the local community and the few tourists contribute to re-establish a connection between the local population and the national past. Schools begun to visit the museum again, local curators went from being heritage guardians to heritage communicators.

5 The activities of the University of Firenze at the National Museum of Aleppo

5.1 2021-2022 Still Standing project

After the reopening of the National Museum in 2019, it became evident that the archaeological heritage preserved in it still needed attention. As mentioned above, the monumental sculptures were neither restored nor put on display but simply left in the dismantled halls. Some of these were found in excavations carried out from the 1920s and are the product of the local traditional craftsmanship of stone carvers. All of them show damages from gunfire, blast, decay and lack of maintenance. This state of “disruption” of the national museum closely mirrors the current conditions of Aleppo’s society, which maintains its various and multifaceted elements, but strives to reestablish internal bonds. Besides those monuments that are directly connected to the Aleppo region, the museum hosts monuments, and artefacts from regions where many refugees witnessed the progressive destruction of their archaeological heritage (as an example the ‘Ain Dara temple in the Afrin valley, bombed in 2017). The heritage as well as the people coming from these areas show a resilience through conflict and crisis, they are still standing.



Fig. 4. October 2021. Re-exhibit of the Ain et-Tell Statue with representatives of the local community and authorities. guests ©Aleppo project

The idea that restoring and reinstalling the archaeological materials specific to this region and neighboring areas, may contribute, at least partially, to the restoration of the identity of the Aleppo community was the core concept of the pilot project “Still standing” carried out in 2021 by the University of Firenze in collaboration with the DGAM; it focused on the restoration of one monumental statue (9th century BCE) damaged by bomb shelling and found seventy years ago in the urban area of Aleppo. On October 4th we celebrated together with the Museum staff, representatives from the DGAM in Damascus, representatives of several groups of the local community the new-exhibit of the “king” at the entrance hall of the building [27, 28].

This experience, and the subsequent damage assessment carried out in 2022 with the collaboration of ReStruere, let us better understand the problems and needs of the building and its collections, the availability of materials and know-how in Aleppo and the potential economic development that a complete restoration of the Museum could bring to the citizens. On the other side, meeting, interviews and debates with local curators, visitors, professionals working on different aspects of safeguard and conservation, materials analysis, tourism, and education clearly showed a basic need: to work on a museography that would not “re-create” the same concept of the National Museum as it was conceived before the war, but rather to embed in the museum narrative the dramatic events that affected the city in the past 15 years and the ever changing social complexity that the city is now representing.

5.2 The 2023 Earthquake

The rehabilitation project of the building and its collection faced at the beginning of this year a new challenge: the consequences of the earthquake that occurred on February 6th, 2023. These consequences were twofold: 1. Visible damages to the infrastructure and completely absence of electricity and ventilation. 2. The museum curators and employees in part left their houses immediately after the event fearing further earthquake events and have been using the museum structure as a provisional stay for four months after the earthquake, ascribing to the building the value of a “safe space”.



Fig. 5. June 2023. Post-earthquake damage assessment on the first floor of the museum building with ReStruere and Unifi team. guests ©Aleppo project

As a result of these events, in 2023 the project focused on earthquake relief measures on the cultural heritage (physical damages to the structure and to the collection) and aimed also at providing direct relief to the local community. In the earthquake damage assessment carried out on the structure in June 2023 together with the DGAM and ReStruere, it has been possible to state that the building suffered some structural damages that did not affect its stability, but consistently weakened the building that would not be able to face a second, even lighter earthquake event. Moreover, analyzing in detail the structure it became evident that if we would intervene to make the building an earthquake-proof structure, the museum could become also a place that local communities may use as shelter in the event of an earthquake. This element would add much value to the role of the museum inside the community. Therefore, after some emergency interventions to close the shattered windows and remove the rubble, the university of Florence begun with the DGAM to sample the building materials to plan structural

intervention that would keep the structure stable in case of an earthquake event. The museum project would become a “cultural construction site” setting the museum not only as a cultural heritage but also as an institution actively contributing to earthquake relief. Thanks to the financial support of Al-Aliph foundation and the cooperation of Terres des Hommes- Italy first earthquake relief intervention begun in October 2023 and will continue in 2024, guaranteeing power supply for the whole structure (including the pumps) with solar energy, repairing the earthquake damages and planning structural interventions to make it earthquake proof.

5.3 The museography concept

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” [18].

The museography concept of the new National Museum of Aleppo should consider the long history of its territory and the population living in it. Its main aim is to provide the city of Aleppo, its citizens as well as Syria and the Syrians with a modern, inclusive, and sustainable national museum for archaeology, based on a bottom-up approach to experience the archaeological collection and use it as a medium for education and peace building. Each bottom-up approach requires a constant dialog in the making, that means that a draft museography idea will be discussed, changed and redrafted on the making, and we are still at the first steps of comparison, discussion and negotiation not only with the museum staff, but mainly with all local actors (stakeholders, participants, facilitators, volunteers, students) who may contribute to shape the narrative.

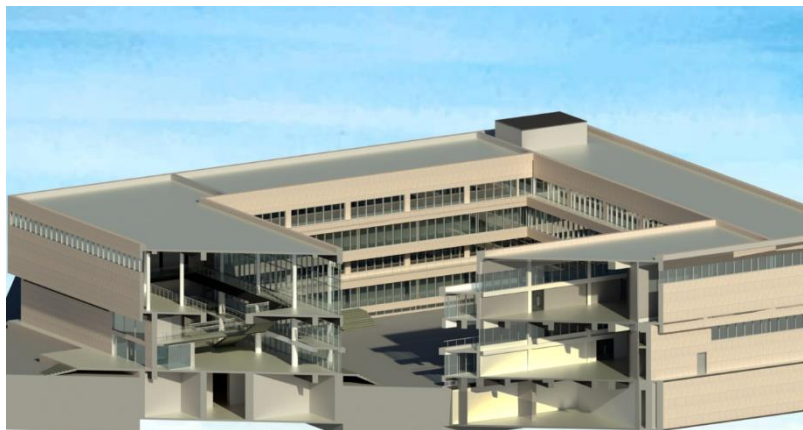


Fig. 6. BIM Model of the museum structure © ReStruere

In the first draft, modernity is mainly represented by a combination between a “traditional” educational approach with a thematic organization of the exhibit rooms. Different themes, that are related to human life, such as domestic activities, ritual spaces or funerary customs, will be presented, in chronological order, using artefacts and monuments that will show to the museum guests not only change and continuity of traditions over time, but also the ability of Syrian territory and of Aleppo in particular to offer an inclusive space, where different communities could live together keeping their traditions and beliefs and sharing everyday customs and activities in the past as well as today in the multifaceted Syrian territory. Using the same structure of the museum through a profound reshaping of the spaces and using local materials and expertise is considered the best approach to guarantee both durability and sustainability of the project. Moreover, the museum structure and its location has become over the years a marker in the urban topography of the city, keeping its original location but rearranging its collection signals the local community innovation in continuity. Renovation of the structure, restoration of the collection and rearrangement of the materials following both an educational and thematic approaches are the activities that should transform the museum into a shared safe space, a place for training, discussion, confrontation, i.e. a cultural building site.

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