

Daniel Brook, *The Architect of 9/11*, published in *Slate*, September 8-10, 2009

I.

A month after 9/11, Fouad Ajami wrote in the *New York Times Magazine*, "I almost know Mohamed Atta, the Egyptian [at] the controls of the jet that crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center." While the Middle East scholar had never met the lead hijacker, Ajami knew his type: the young Arab male living abroad, tantalized by yet alienated from Western modernity, who retreats into fundamentalist piety.

Eight years after 9/11, we still almost know Mohamed Atta. We can almost see him, a gaunt and spectral figure making his way through Hamburg's red-light district en route to his radical storefront Al-Quds Mosque. We still vividly recall his ominous visa photograph. But the man in that photograph remains a cipher, his eyes vacant. How did those eyes see the world?

We'll never know for sure, but part of the answer may lie in a document he left behind, one that has strangely gone largely unexamined: his master's thesis in urban planning. While the bulk of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudi Arabian street toughs tapped for their brawn, Atta was chosen for his brains. Trained as an architect in his native Egypt, he went on to pursue a master's degree in city planning at the Hamburg University of Technology, in Germany.

In the climate after 9/11, when attempts to understand the terrorists were often seen as apologies for them, the thesis Atta wrote was not given close scrutiny. *Newsweek*, among other outlets, reported that the thesis lashed out at the imposition of modernist high-rise buildings on Arab cities, but only its chilling dedication—"My prayer

and my sacrifice and my life and my death belong to Allah, Lord of the worlds"-got wide coverage. When the British Prospect magazine sent a reporter to Hamburg a few months after Sept. 11, she dismissed out of hand the idea that Atta's academic work was worth considering. After securing an interview with Atta's thesis adviser, professor Dittmar Machule, the reporter concluded it was "ludicrous that Atta's ideas on how to preserve an old quarter of Aleppo are regarded as a window into his terrorist's mind." Machule bolstered this impression, telling the Associated Press that the thesis had "no anti-Americanism, no anti-Zionism, no anti-Christianity, just good thinking."

Perhaps the subject-the architecture of a little-known Syrian city-sounded too esoteric to be relevant. But it always struck me as a missed opportunity to understand Atta-and, perhaps, to understand what led him to commit his hideous crime. So I went to Hamburg to see what I could learn about the thesis. I then retraced Atta's academic research across three continents, interviewing those who knew him as an urban-planning student and trying to see the places I visited through Atta's eyes-those of a keen architectural observer wearing ideological blinders.

I met with professor Machule at his office in Hamburg, where he keeps the only known copy of Atta's thesis under lock and key. While Machule acknowledges that publishing the document would be in the public interest, he worries Atta's father, a retired EgyptAir attorney who maintains his son's innocence, would sue if the document were published without family consent. But Machule was willing to walk through the thesis with me. I sat in the spot where Atta gave his thesis defense in 1999, and together we made our way through the German document section by section. Machule translated portions of it and

responded to my questions. The thesis was also heavy on visuals- photographs, maps, and sketches of proposed redevelopments.

The subject of the thesis is a section of Aleppo, Syria's second city. Atta describes decades of meddling by Western urban planners, who rammed highways through the neighborhood's historic urban fabric and replaced many of its once ubiquitous courtyard houses with modernist high-rises. Atta calls for rebuilding the area along traditional lines, all tiny shops and odd-angled cul-de-sacs. The highways and high-rises are to be removed- in the meticulous color-coded maps, they are all slated for demolition. Traditional courtyard homes and market stalls are to be rebuilt.

For Atta, the rebuilding of Aleppo's traditional cityscape was part of a larger project to restore the Islamic culture of the neighborhood, a culture he sees as threatened by the West. "The traditional structures of the society in all areas should be re-erected," Atta writes in the thesis, using architectural metaphors to describe his reactionary cultural project. In Atta's Aleppo, women wouldn't leave the house, and policies would be carefully crafted so as not to "engender emancipatory thoughts of any kind," which he sees as "out of place in Islamic society."

The subtitle of the thesis is *Neighborhood Development in an Islamic-Oriental City*, and the use of that anachronistic term- Islamic-Oriental city- is telling. The term denotes a concept rooted in 19th-century European Orientalism, according to which Islamic civilization and Western civilization are entirely distinct and opposite: The dynamic, rational West gallops toward the future while the backward East remains cut off from foreign influence, exclusively defined by Islam, and frozen in time. In his academic work, Atta takes the Orientalist conceit of two distinct civilizations, one superior, the

other inferior, and simply flips the chauvinism from pro-Western to pro-Muslim.

Today, the "Islamic-Oriental city" is a teetering intellectual edifice that survives only on the right-wing fringes of academic Middle East studies, in the imagination of tourists seeking to experience the "authentic" Thousand and One Nights Arabia, and, as Atta's work makes clear, in the minds of Islamist radicals. Ironically, there could hardly be better evidence for the fallaciousness of the "Islamic-Oriental city" concept than the urban history of Aleppo and specifically of its Bab al-Nasr neighborhood, the old city quarter that Atta describes-and egregiously misinterprets-in his thesis.

Professor Machule told me he found Atta's reactionary plans for the neighborhood impractical but not objectionable. "He made a proposal for a design which seems to be from the 17th century," Machule said. "I would say this is not realistic, these are dreams. But why should young people not have dreams?" Atta's ideas about the role of women conflicted with Machule's sensibilities, but the professor said he saw the benefit of training a talented Egyptian who could bring Western urban planning techniques-if not Western architectural styles-back to the Arab world. When Atta refused to shake the hand of the lone woman on his thesis defense committee, Machule explained to her that he meant no offense by it, that this was simply his strict Muslim practice. Atta received high marks.

Degree in hand, Atta left Germany. A few months later, over a Ramadan feast in Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden informed him that he would be a martyr. Atta did not choose the World Trade Center as a target; Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mechanical engineer now commonly called "the architect of 9/11," did that, likely because his nephew Ramsi Youssef had tried and failed to level the buildings in 1993. But

when Atta was told he would lead a mission to destroy America's tallest and most famous modernist high-rise complex—the apotheosis of the building type he dreamed of razing in Aleppo—he may have felt the hand of divine providence at work.

II.

Mohamed Atta became an architect at Cairo University, in the city where he came of age. The Egyptian capital is a fascinating, albeit poorly maintained, open-air museum, spanning 5,000 years of architectural history. In its recent past—since Napoleon's 1798 invasion, in Egypt's near-geologic time frame—the city has lurched from Western model to Western model, trying in vain to reclaim its lost glory. In the Abdin neighborhood where Atta grew up, grand Parisian apartment buildings constructed in the 19th century now sit caked in dust, their windows shattered. Downtown, along the Nile, 20th-century highways and high-rises modeled on those of Houston and Los Angeles create a traffic-clogged nightmare, as the carless masses of Cairo dart across eight-lane expressways using one another as human shields.

In the rotting modernist slab that is the Cairo University architecture department, students and professors work toward a contemporary architecture that reconnects to the pre-Napoleonic past. A senior project displayed in its halls offers a Frank Lloyd Wright quotation of surprising relevance to the Egyptian conundrum: "Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization." Though the faculty encourages students to forge a new synthesis of past and present in their work, many students turn in what professor Aly Hatem Gabr calls "cut-and-paste" architecture, dropping

nostalgic designs right out of the 1600s into their proposals for contemporary Egypt.

After graduating from the university in 1990, Atta worked briefly as an architect in Cairo and studied German at the city's Goethe Institute. In 1992, he began his graduate studies in Germany and worked part-time as a draftsman at a Hamburg urban design firm. In the summer of 1995, he returned to Cairo on a research fellowship to evaluate plans for historic preservation, traffic control, and tourism promotion in the city's Islamic Quarter. (The fellowship was funded by the Carl Duisberg Society, a German institution that supports research on the developing world.) The Islamic Quarter, which houses the world's greatest collection of medieval Muslim monuments, was collapsing in humiliating fashion: Inadequate sanitation had so contaminated Cairo's water table with human waste that it was eroding the buildings' limestone foundations.

Packed with historic sites and teeming with impoverished residents, the Islamic Quarter has long struggled to balance the needs of tourists and locals. At the southern end of the neighborhood, merchants in the historic Khan el-Khalli souq hawk hookah pipes and Nefertiti busts to tourists. Up the narrow main street, light industry appears, providing employment for locals but little ambience for vacationers. Despite the invaluable monuments, the neighborhood, with its mix of crumbling historic homes and poorly built high-rises, doesn't feel like a historic district. As Nasser Rabbat, a Syrian-born MIT architecture professor who has published on Islamic Cairo, told me while on sabbatical in the city, "it's so dirty that even those of us who are enamored with the architecture think twice before going to look at the architecture."

Despite the shocking condition of the neighborhood's treasures, Atta found the government's proposed solution even worse, according to Ralph Bodenstein, one of Atta's German fellowship partners. He spoke to me at his office in Cairo, where he now lives and works as an architectural historian and professor. The fellowship team secured an interview with the governor of Cairo, who laid out his vision for the district: The residents would be evicted, smaller structures around the monuments (like the tiny stalls that are Cairo's answer to the convenience store) would be leveled, and the district would be turned into a park for tourists. "He wanted the guards working there to wear historic costumes," Bodenstein recalled with an incredulous grin. "So if it's a Mamluk monument, they should wear Mamluk costumes, and if it's a Fatimid monument, they should wear Fatimid costumes. He was very fond of the idea. He was really, really proud." Atta was appalled, Bodenstein said. It seemed that in the governor's eyes, tourists were more important than the citizens he supposedly served.

The governor's fanciful plan was something of a trial balloon—a standard way of soliciting a modicum of public input in Egypt's undemocratic system—but Atta knew that eviction was not an idle threat. At the time of the fellowship, preservationists from France were restoring the northern wall of the medieval city of Cairo, and the Egyptian authorities were evicting the people living along it. "We discussed the northern-wall issue because they were throwing the people out," Bodenstein recalled. "And he was very critical of that. He thought that was a price for tourism that should not be paid." These contemporary plans echoed a familiar theme in the history of preservation efforts in Cairo. From the start in 1880, with the founding of the Comité des Monuments de L'Art Arabe, a French-run historic preservation group, protecting Cairo's architectural heritage has been a

project driven by Westerners with few scruples about using evictions to save Egypt from the Egyptians.

While secular preservationists like Bodenstein saw the government's actions as the natural impulse of an undemocratic state heavily dependent on foreign tourism for revenue, in Atta's mind, they may have seemed like something darker, part of a Western-dominated world system designed to humiliate Muslims. Atta's worldview was fanatically conspiratorial, as documented in Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower*, Terry McDermott's *Perfect Soldiers*, The 9/11 Commission Report, and elsewhere. In Atta's imagination, the United Nations refused to intervene during the Bosnian genocide because of its anti-Muslim prejudice and Monica Lewinsky was a Mossad agent, sent to bring down President Clinton for his growing sympathies toward the Palestinians. That the fair-skinned colonials of the Comité had been replaced by the Egyptian officials of a repressive, U.S.-backed regime would only have made the conspiracy more sinister. This worldview, in which the historical trespasses of the Western powers are exaggerated into a vast, ongoing, anti-Muslim conspiracy, unfolding on blueprints as well as battlefields, would color Atta's master's research in Aleppo, Syria, where he would devise his own misguided plan for historic preservation.

III.

In 1994, Mohamed Atta traveled to Istanbul with a student group and continued onward to visit Dittmar Machule in northern Syria, where the professor was doing fieldwork on a Bronze Age village under excavation. But Atta found himself more interested in the traditional urbanism of the nearest major city, Aleppo. Atta was hardly the first student of Middle Eastern architecture drawn to Aleppo. Along with Fez in Morocco and Sana'a in Yemen, Aleppo is considered among the best-

preserved cities in the Arab world. When he decided to write his thesis on the city, he returned later that year to conduct more extensive research.

For Atta, the architecturally sensitive Cairene, Aleppo must have been a revelation. While Cairo's historic souq is largely a tourist trap and its Islamic Quarter a hodgepodge of historic monuments and recently slapped together high-rises, Aleppo is a largely intact historic city of 15,000 limestone buildings linked by labyrinthine streets and peaked-roof tunnels. Aleppo's enormous traditional souq boasts more than seven miles of passageways topped by vaulted stone ceilings with natural skylights. Selling everything from spices and freshly slaughtered lamb to carpets and hardware, the souq remains the heart of the city's commerce; only a tiny section caters to tourists. As Machule explained, "His impression was that this was a place which kept the culture of former times, which is in an original situation and not overly formed by European influences."

Atta chose to focus on the Bab al-Nasr neighborhood just north of the souq, an ideal test case for a historic preservationist. Unlike the perfectly preserved souq, the Bab al-Nasr neighborhood was partially destroyed by mid-20th-century French modernist urban planners. Today, it is hemmed in on three sides by modern, straight, multilane streets, many of them lined with high-rise apartments and office buildings. But a few steps from the high-rises, the historic fabric remains intact.

The walk from the straight streets, jammed with taxicabs, into the Bab al-Nasr neighborhood is wondrous. It is a journey from a world of automobiles to a world of donkey carts; from a world of inert rectilinear forms to a world of alleyways, curving arches, and latticework windows; from garish, commercially produced signs hawking mobile phones and soft drinks to the simple black-and-green stenciled

image of the Ka'ba in Mecca, Islam's holiest site, atop wooden doorways. Even more powerful than the visual impact of the transition is the auditory one. Just a few paces into the labyrinth, the din of vehicular traffic is replaced by the banter of conversation in the marketplace. A brief stroll deeper, and the voices of men are replaced by the voices of boys chasing after a soccer ball in a courtyard as a hijab-clad mother looks on from the window above. As I explored the neighborhood with a map that failed to capture every twisting alleyway, I stopped to ask an old man in a red-and-white checkered headdress for directions to a historic hamam. "Assalamu alaikum," I greeted him. "Wa alaikum salaam," he slowly replied, not with the usual perfunctory politesse but with a sincerity that made me feel he really did wish me peace.

For Atta, already an orthodox believer in the Manichaean division of the planet into Dar-al-Islam (the world of Islam) and Dar-al-Harb (the world of war), the contrast between the historic neighborhood and the highways grafted onto it must have been striking. Indeed, the contrast is illustrated on the cover of Atta's thesis, by a pair of photos and a pair of architectural maps. In the photos, a shot of the taxi-clogged street is juxtaposed with a shot of two little boys smiling in an alleyway in front of a crumbling latticework window. In the maps, an aerial view of the straight streets, traffic circle, and blocky high-rises is contrasted with a sketch of the old city's honeycomb street plan.

To Atta, the French planners' imposition of modernist urbanism on this "Islamic-Oriental city" wasn't just architecturally ugly—it undermined the traditional Islamic culture of the neighborhood. So did globalization, an economic force of impersonal, mechanistic transactions that bestows inordinate power on wealthy, non-Muslim countries. (In his thesis, Atta worries that Syria's pro-market reforms

coupled with a possible Middle East peace deal could give Israel, the most developed economy in the region, a dominant role in Syrian commerce.) By rebuilding the physical structures of the neighborhood, Atta felt he could purge the neighborhood of foreign influence, not just foreign architecture. In the tiny market stalls he sketched (to replace the modern structures he planned to raze), business would be inextricably linked to merchant-customer relationships, a bulwark against globalization. To preserve Islamic traditions and revive a sense of social solidarity, Atta calls for the creation of a "culture committee" to organize events such as a night of poetry to recount tales of the neighborhood's illustrious past.

Atta's view of himself as the vanguardist architect who embodied the will of the common people was not entirely without justification. For his thesis research, Atta interviewed neighborhood residents, and his work reflects their views. Comprising almost exclusively poor, conservative Muslims, the people of the Bab al-Nasr neighborhood really do object, on religious grounds, to the high-rise buildings for compromising their privacy. For the conservative, religious locals, the interior courtyards of their homes, which shield women from public view, are the architectural equivalent of an abaya or burqa. As Razan Abdul-Wahab, a hijab-free Aleppine planner who met with Atta when he was conducting his research, told me, many residents of the neighborhood's traditional courtyard houses made "additions that looked very, very ugly, to prevent people in the higher buildings from looking into their courtyard and somehow to their women." Atta seized on this phenomenon, as it neatly supported his notion of the Middle Eastern city as one that is physically-and exclusively-defined by Islam.

What Atta didn't see-or saw but chose to ignore-was how untraditional this parochial way of life is for Aleppo in general and

the Bab al-Nasr neighborhood in particular. Historically, Bab al-Nasr was one of the most religiously mixed neighborhoods in Aleppo, with a large population of Christians and Jews. In their 1794 *The Natural History of Aleppo*, a pair of expatriate British brothers wrote that the neighborhood's eponymous gate (Bab al-Nasr means "Gate of Victory") was formerly called Bab al-Yahud ("the Jews' Gate") and had a third name, St. George's Gate, which was used by the Christian population. In their neighborhood map, the British brothers identify the southwestern portion of the neighborhood as the "Jews Contrada." Contemporary scholar Yasser Tabbaa writes that the city's Jewish Quarter was located in that part of the Bab al-Nasr neighborhood in the medieval period as well, noting that the main synagogue was first built in the sixth century.

It is hard to miss this history when visiting the neighborhood. A decommissioned Jesuit school and an abandoned synagogue (the corner of which is now used as a urinal despite a sign explicitly forbidding such use) bear witness to the area's diverse past. The current population of the neighborhood is largely observant Muslims, but they're recent arrivals from the countryside who have moved in as the more prosperous Christian population has departed for outlying neighborhoods and the Jews have moved abroad.

While it may not be surprising that Atta's interpretation of Aleppo's history is deeply colored by ideology, the way in which he misinterprets the neighborhood's history gives us insight into how Atta saw the world. Islamist ideology is based on restoring a supposed Middle Eastern golden age that existed before Western encroachment and secularization. Atta has written this arcadia into his thesis.

Thanks to its central location, however, the Middle East has never been cut off from outside influence. Over the millenniums, Aleppo

was conquered by the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Byzantines, and Arabian Muslims, to name just a few. While in the Orientalist conception the Middle Eastern city is shaped exclusively by Islam, in reality, both the pre-Islamic history of Aleppo and the significant non-Muslim communities of its more recent past shape the cityscape to this day. Walking through the souq Atta so loved, it seems a tangle of passageways. But viewed from above, it is revealed as perfectly rectangular. The souq was built into the Hellenistic Via Recta (Straight Street) leading from the city's western gate to its center. Rather than a pure expression of Islamic civilization, the souq is evidence of a larger conversation between cultures. In a secular reading of history, the Arabian Muslims who conquered Syria in the sixth century are no more or less foreign than the Greeks who had conquered it in the third century BC. Even Aleppo's courtyard houses, which Atta sees as a physical expression of Islamic doctrine, have roots in ancient Rome. Rather than being a manifestation of Aleppo's distinctive "Oriental" style, they are evidence of the city's enduring connection to the West.

Atta's attempts to shield Aleppo from the market forces of the West are also more a function of his fears than of the city's history. Even under Muslim rule, the wealth that made Aleppo's impressive souq buildings possible grew out of the city's cosmopolitan trading culture. The city boomed in Ottoman times because of its strategic location on the Silk Road. As a center of East-West trade, Aleppo became home to the world's first consulate, in 1517, when the French diplomats of François I opened an office in a caravansary. The Venetians and Elizabeth I's Britons quickly followed suit. While Atta viewed global trade as a threat to the traditional culture of Aleppo, the city was built trading goods from as far away as England and China. It is only

relatively recent phenomena that are responsible for the Middle East's comparative isolation today—in Aleppo's case, the opening of the Suez Canal, which cut the city out of the East-West trade and shifted wealth to the world's coastal rims.

Today, it is the port of Hamburg, not the trading post of Aleppo, that is a leading center of the Oriental carpet business. In its Speicherstadt section, block after block of warehouses are filled with Middle Eastern merchants cutting deals to ship their wares around the world. But just as Atta failed to acknowledge the cosmopolitan culture of Aleppo's golden age, the cosmopolitanism of prosperous, diverse Hamburg alienated him as well, driving him deeper and deeper into the sureties of fundamentalism.

When Fouad Ajami wrote in the New York Times Magazine that "I almost know Mohamed Atta," he meant he knew young Egyptians who, like Atta, embraced fundamentalism abroad. Ajami is right to understand Atta as an Egyptian, but he must also be understood as an architect. With the crumbling legacy of European imperialism and American-backed dictatorship written into its Paris-meets-Houston cityscape, Cairo is one of the world's worst advertisements for East-West relations. With that city as his tragic starting place, Atta refused to comprehend historic Aleppo, a cosmopolitan trading city where Europeans and Arabs, Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived side-by-side for centuries. He scorned diverse, mercantile Hamburg; he attacked polyglot New York. By allowing a discordant present to blot out a more hopeful past, Atta ensured further discord in the future.