

# Marwa al-Sabouni on the Power of Architecture to Divide and Unite



By [Olivia Snaije](#)

June 23, 2016

Wit

(15)



*This article was updated on September 30, 2017*

By Olivia Snaije



Marwa al-Sabouni is a young architect from Syria who recently published a book called *The Battle for Home*.

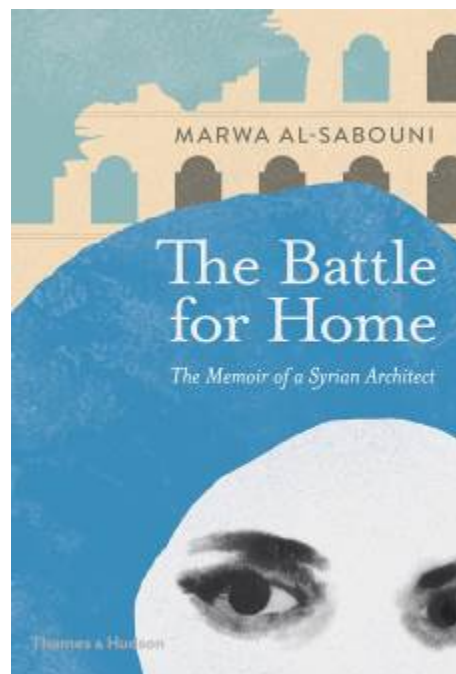
Al-Sabouni has a PhD in Islamic architecture and as a student won first place in the UN-Habitat Competition for her project to rebuild the area of Baba Amr which was destroyed during the Syrian conflict. Al-Sabouni lives in Homs, where she has observed how the architectural construct has directly impacted the community and its environment, before and during the civil war. She voices her concerns for rebuilding future cities and says architecture not only plays a role but has a duty to bring communities together in the future. Al-Sabouni and her husband, also an architect, opened a bookshop a few months ago in Homs, in partnership with

the bookshop Nour E Sham in Damascus. Al-Sabouni says that the reaction has been very positive because people are "longing for books". Bookwitty spoke with her via Skype:

***What was the impetus to write the book?***

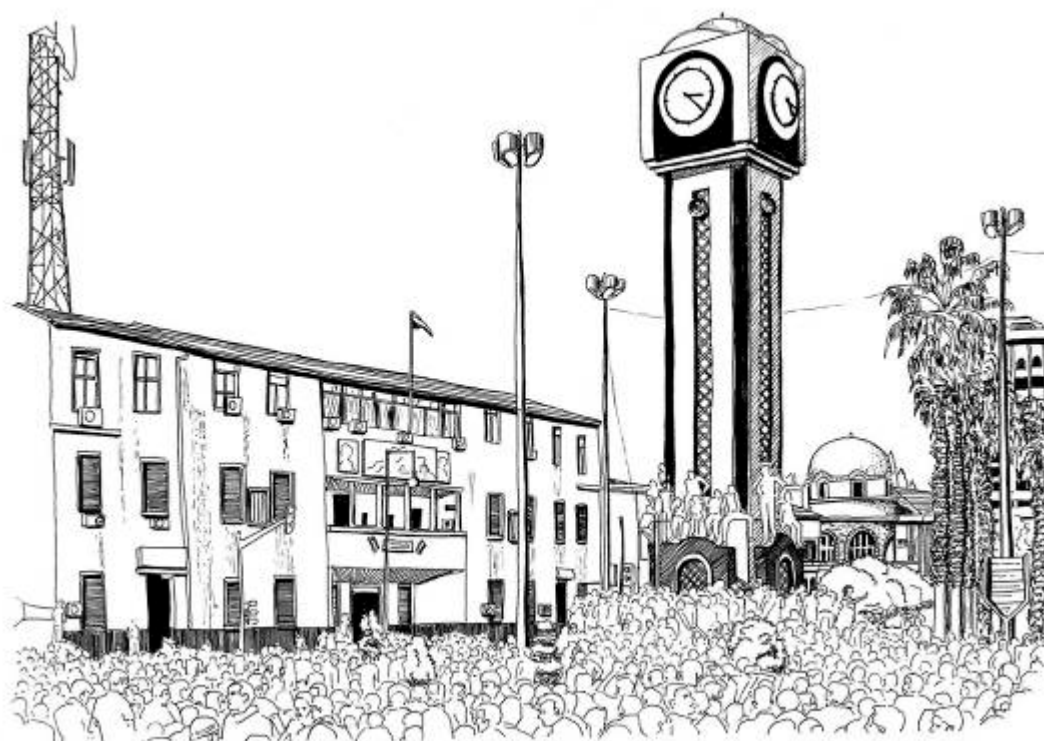
***You wrote a series of articles on the role of architects in 2013 and 2014--were these the foundation for your book?***

Marwa al-Sabouni: The articles were the introduction, they made me realize that I could write in English. It started with writing for the Riba (Royal Institute of British Architects) journal, at the time I was studying for my PhD and the discussions with my husband, putting down my thoughts on the situation and the role of architecture all became part of the book idea.



***How did you conduct your research? What inspired you?***

MAS: I benefited a lot from the thoughts of the philosopher Roger Scruton, his book , *The Aesthetics of Architecture* had such an influence on me. Two other books I studied for my PhD did as well: *Philosophy and Architecture* by Michael Mitias, and *The Architecture of Happiness* by Alain de Botton.



The demonstration that turned into "The Carnage of the New Clock".

***You are very critical of government corruption and bad urban planning in your book but you also criticize the Homs upper class, saying they encouraged anti-government demonstrations but never really took part in them. Has this been troublesome for you?***

MAS: In Syria, there's been no reaction, luckily. I guess I approach the subject of corruption from all angles, I'm trying not to take sides and I make observations about what I truly believe and condemn what is wrong. I wouldn't want to offend anyone except for people who should be offended, whether before the war or during the war. I wasn't trying to point fingers.



Khalid Ibn Al-Walid mosque, its main facade and minaret damaged

***What lessons are to be taken away from how your neighbor to the south, Beirut, was rebuilt after the civil war? Its souks never came alive again and old houses are being razed to make way for modern towers...***

MAS: The main lesson to learn from the Lebanese experience is not to repeat it. Unfortunately Beirut is a city for sale, it's not a city for citizens. The Lebanese are being pushed to the side and are growing more distant from their city. It's a city for

tourism and for the elite. It's not a home for anyone. I hope we don't get fascinated by facades and new venues, like Dubai and Beirut.

***What about other cities over time in history that have been destroyed by wars?***

MAS: Berlin is another example of a city that still has the scars of war. Even the heritage that has been preserved, it stands freely and is isolated from the urban fabric, the streets are overly wide. The main thing that is missing is the urban fabric.



A neighborhood in Homs reduced to rubble

***In your book you describe how layers of ancient buildings, some Roman, were discovered one on top of the other during battles...***

MAS: In this area of the Levant it's known that we are living over many layers. Many of these sites lie underneath, unexcavated. Cities are built over many ancient ruins, among which the Roman layers. Sometimes people dig under buildings and encounter a tunnel or a cellar but because they don't want to lose their property for the sake of preservation they ignore the ruins. When we preserve and make heritage sites we should be careful that people be made a priority. We can't change all the parts of our city for a site, we should know how to integrate sites within cities. In

Damascus and Aleppo you can find places from 1000 years ago side by side next to someone's home, this is important, for people and for their heritage.

***You take inspiration from old works of Islamic architecture? Should this be a blueprint for many Muslim countries?***

MAS: I'm opposed to this idea of copying and pasting that is being used in our Muslim world where they take a layer or a pattern like a dome or an arch and just paste it on a modern building. It's very superficial. What I'm arguing for is to recapture the values, not the shape. It's the values that made the shapes emerge. The shapes were the expression of what people believed in. The style comes from a deep understanding of an idea. You can express it in infinite ways. You shouldn't aim for the result, you should aim for what was there to begin with, to recapture the moral and aesthetic values.

***What do you hope will come out of your book?***

MAS: I hope that it will be an obstacle in the face of rebuilding cities in visionless ways, I hope it will be a small message to hesitate before rushing in. In most cities people rushed in to rebuild, to create destinations, they moved very fast to make people feel better but in most cases people were pushed away, and they gave their property to the highest bidder. A tower was built and the people didn't realize how much they lost until it was too late. Syria's built environment played a role in contributing to the war itself because too many people were living in what were effectively sectarian ghettos. The government must not repeat this mistake when it rebuilds –architects play a part not only in the disintegration of communities but also in the integration of them.



# Al-Sabouni and her husband's bookshop, in partnership with Damascus' Nour E Sham

## All illustrations by Marwa al-Sabouni

### Tags

- the battle for home
- syria
- marwaal-sabouni



**Olivia Snaije**

Olivia is a journalist and editor and manages the editorial content for Bookwitty in English. She is based in Paris.

### Found this article relevant?

shaicHariri, Antoinette Tamer, Marcia Lynx Qualey and 12 others found this witty

**Wit**

(15)



### Related Books

