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The Reconstruction Process of Urban Identity and Spatial Continuity in Post-Disaster Contexts: An Evaluation Through Antakya and Bari

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how the historical urban fabric is reconstructed in post-disaster recovery processes within the framework of spatial and functional continuity. Within the scope of the research, the cities of Antakya and Bari are addressed as comparative case studies. Antakya is evaluated as a city that was largely devastated by the earthquakes of February 6, 2023, and is currently undergoing a reconstruction process, whereas the historic center of Bari (Città Vecchia) presents a reference model in which physical and functional continuity have been preserved. Based on a qualitative research approach, the study is conducted through field observations, visual data, and spatial analyses. The two cities are compared according to criteria such as building conditions, functional transformations, street morphology, and spatial continuity. The findings indicate that in Antakya, physical and functional continuity has been disrupted, and urban identity is in a process of reconfiguration, while in Bari, continuity of use and spatial integrity have been maintained. Due to the ongoing reconstruction process in Antakya, the study adopts a process-oriented rather than result-oriented perspective. In this context, interior space and user experience are addressed not through direct observation but through potential spatial scenarios. This study contributes to the literature by evaluating post-disaster spatial continuity through a process-oriented perspective. Consequently, the study reveals that in sustaining urban identity, continuity of use and spatial relationships are more decisive than mere physical reconstruction.
Keywords: Post-disaster reconstruction, Urban identity, Spatial continuity, Adaptive reuse, Historic urban fabric.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the resilient city in post-disaster contexts is often addressed primarily through physical robustness; however, it embodies a multilayered structure that also encompasses psychological, socio-cultural, and symbolic dimensions. In this regard, urban resilience is not limited to the capacity of buildings to withstand external forces, but also includes the continuity of spatial, cultural, and social components that constitute urban identity.

Architectural structures play a decisive role in the formation of urban identity in terms of their existence, qualities, and modes of use. The spatial configuration generated by these structures produces a city-specific image, which is experienced and interpreted by both residents and external users. Accordingly, the city can be understood not merely as a physical environment, but as a dynamic system shaped by its historical accumulation, patterns of use, and layered spatial meanings. In the case of Antakya, the extensive destruction caused by the earthquakes of February 6, 2023, has raised critical questions regarding the city's deep-rooted historical heritage and cultural identity, while also revealing the need for comprehensive strategies to ensure urban resilience in the reconstruction process (Aydin et al., 2025).

In this context, architectural spaces should be considered not only as physical entities but also as elements that produce meaning and representation. The interaction between the

material structure of urban space and its cultural and symbolic meanings emerges as a fundamental determinant in the formation of urban identity. Therefore, urban identity can be defined as a dynamic construct shaped through the integrated interaction of the physical environment, social practices, and spatial meanings. The sustainability of this dynamic structure is directly related to the preservation of urban memory and collective identity (Bayazıt, 2024; Yüksel, 2021). The severe damage inflicted upon Antakya's rich historical layers and multicultural structure by the earthquakes has necessitated the reconstruction of this collective memory and identity (Turhanoğlu, 2023, 2024).

The historic urban fabric of Antakya, located in the Hatay province of Türkiye, suffered extensive damage and large-scale destruction as a result of the February 6, 2023 earthquakes. This destruction is considered to be associated not only with the direct impact of the disaster but also with deficiencies in pre-disaster conservation, maintenance, and regulatory processes. This situation has revealed the critical consequences of inadequate disaster risk reduction strategies, particularly through the severe damage inflicted on cultural heritage elements that form the core of urban identity (Aktemur & Ünlükaplan, 2024; Bozkurt, 2023; Soyluk & Köse, 2024). Accordingly, post-disaster urban transformation processes cannot be addressed solely in terms of physical reconstruction; they also necessitate a critical reassessment of existing urban governance and conservation practices.

The ongoing reconstruction process in Antakya represents a critical threshold for the reconstitution of urban identity. However, as this process is still incomplete, it requires a process-oriented analytical approach rather than a result-oriented evaluation. In this context, the current condition should be examined not only through the assessment of reconstructed buildings but also through the dynamics of re-establishing spatial continuity. Within this framework, examining the status of cultural heritage following the 2023 Antakya earthquakes and the legal regulations concerning the transformation of disaster-prone areas (Uzun & Somuncu, 2023), as well as the role of local residents' sense of belonging in the reconstruction process (Dinç, 2023), becomes particularly significant.

In order to provide a comparative framework, the historic center of Bari, known as "Città Vecchia," is considered as a reference case. In this area, it is observed that buildings largely maintain their original functions, residential use continues, and limited commercial interventions are integrated in harmony with spatial integrity. This condition demonstrates that spatial and functional continuity plays a decisive role in preserving urban identity.

In contrast, in pre-earthquake Antakya, it is observed that incompatible interventions in the façades and immediate surroundings of historic structures, often driven by commercial concerns, weakened spatial integrity. This situation indicates that the current reconstruction process presents not only a physical repair phase but also an opportunity to reassess past conservation approaches. Therefore, post-disaster reconstruction strategies should not focus solely on the repair of physical structures but should also adopt a holistic approach that preserves local identity, social fabric, and cultural continuity (Aytıs, 2023; Tekeli, 2023).

This study investigates how historic structures can be addressed within the context of spatial and functional continuity in post-disaster reconstruction processes. It argues that the preservation of urban identity should be evaluated not only through physical reproduction but also through continuity of use, spatial integrity, and re-established spatial relationships. In this regard, particularly in the context of structures that have not yet been completed, interior spatial organization and user experience are approached not through directly observable data but as a potential spatial construct in the process of redefinition.

2. CONTINUITY AND THE PROCESS OF RECONSTRUCTION IN HISTORIC URBAN FABRIC

The preservation of historic urban fabric does not merely imply safeguarding physical elements from the past; it also encompasses the sustainability of collective memory, spatial identity, and continuity of use. In this context, historic buildings and streets should be regarded not only as physical entities but as dynamic components integrated with everyday life practices, shaping users' sense of belonging and their relationship with space.

Spatial continuity directly influences how users experience the city, enabling the maintenance of everyday life within a sense of familiarity and continuity. This becomes particularly critical in post-disaster contexts, as it facilitates the re-establishment of residents' connections with place. However, in post-disaster reconstruction processes, this continuity is often disrupted, and urban identity enters a phase of redefinition. Within this process, the contextual and evolutionary nature of place identity should be taken into account, and urban conservation strategies should adopt an integrative approach that reconciles this dynamic structure (Ercan, 2016).

At this point, the preservation of historic fabric cannot be achieved solely through the physical reproduction of buildings; rather, it requires the continuity of use, the preservation of spatial relationships, and the integrity of the street–building–interior continuum. Historic environments constitute a multilayered spatial system extending from the street scale to interior spatial organization. The relationships between public, semi-public, and private spaces enable the city to be perceived as a holistic experiential environment. Therefore, interventions in historic environments that focus solely on façade or building scale may lead to a weakening of spatial continuity. Indeed, the integrity of elements such as building–courtyard relationships, street patterns, and square configurations, key components that preserve the authenticity of urban fabric, ensures the sustainability of urban identity. In this regard, it is crucial that spatial identity elements be carefully considered in planning processes (Günaydın & Altunkasa, 2019).

On the other hand, the preservation of historic fabric holds significant potential in terms of tourism and economic value generation. However, for this potential to be sustainable, commercial uses must be structured in harmony with the existing spatial identity, without leading to uncontrolled transformations. Otherwise, even if physical preservation is achieved, spatial identity may weaken through changing patterns of use. The complexity of the concept of identity in historic cities necessitates that conservation practices address not only physical aspects but also the social and cultural continuity of the urban environment (Çelik & Türk, 2021; Taşçıoğlu & Atmaca, 2015).

Within this framework, both national and international examples of historic preservation demonstrate the decisive role of spatial and functional continuity in sustaining urban identity.

2.1. Examples from Türkiye

Practices aimed at preserving historic urban fabric in Türkiye present diverse approaches in which the balance between conservation and use is addressed in different ways. In Safranbolu, the substantial preservation of residential use alongside the controlled integration of tourism demonstrates that spatial and functional continuity can be sustained simultaneously (Ahunbay, 1994, 2019). In contrast, in cases such as Beypazarı and Antalya Kaleiçi, it is observed that the increase in tourism-oriented transformations may partially weaken original patterns of use (Tiesdell et al., 1996).

In the case of Mardin, while the original materiality and façade characteristics of buildings are largely preserved, it is observed that increasing tourism-oriented use in certain areas affects the spatial balance. This indicates that, in the preservation of historic fabric, not only physical interventions but also patterns of use are decisive factors.

2.2. International Examples

At the international scale, approaches to the preservation of historic fabric demonstrate that spatial continuity and continuity of use are addressed in an integrated manner. In Bari's "Città Vecchia" district, the preservation of original building functions, the استمرار of residential use, and the integration of limited commercial interventions in harmony with spatial integrity highlight the importance of functional continuity in maintaining urban identity (Plevoets & Cleempoel, 2011).

Similarly, in cities such as Florence and Venice, strict conservation and regulatory mechanisms ensure the preservation of spatial continuity through façade organization, material use, and building scale (Ashworth, 1991). In Barcelona's Gothic Quarter, the active use of public spaces and functional diversity support spatial vitality, while the regulation of excessive tourism helps maintain urban balance (Pendlebury, 2008).

These examples demonstrate that the preservation of historic fabric is not limited to the safeguarding of physical structures alone; rather, it is directly related to continuity of use, spatial integrity, and social practices. In this regard, the sustainability of urban identity in post-disaster reconstruction processes depends not only on physical reproduction but also on the re-establishment of these multilayered relationships of continuity.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted using a qualitative research approach based on a comparative analysis method. Within the scope of the research, the cities of Antakya and Bari are examined as two distinct case areas in terms of the preservation of historic urban fabric and the processes of re-establishing spatial continuity. Antakya is evaluated as a case where spatial continuity has been disrupted due to ongoing post-disaster reconstruction, whereas Bari represents a reference model in which historic fabric has been largely preserved and continuity of use has been maintained. These two contrasting conditions provide an appropriate basis for comparatively analyzing the effects of spatial and functional continuity on urban identity.

Rather than adopting a result-oriented evaluation, the study follows a process-oriented analytical approach. Accordingly, the current condition in Antakya is considered not as a completed spatial configuration but as an urban structure in the process of reconstruction and transformation.

The following methods were employed in the data collection process:

- On-site observations and field studies in Antakya
- Documentation of spatial conditions through visual data (photographs)
- Examination of spatial relationships at the street and building scales
- Development of a theoretical framework through a comprehensive literature review

In the analysis phase, the analysis was conducted through cross-case comparison based on predefined spatial and functional criteria. The two cities are compared based on the following criteria:

- Physical condition and continuity of buildings
- Functional transformation and continuity of use
- Materiality and façade integrity
- Street pattern and spatial relationships
- Impacts on urban identity

Through these criteria, not only the physical presence of historic structures but also their patterns of use and transformations in terms of spatial continuity are evaluated.

Within the scope of this study, interior spatial organization is addressed indirectly, based on the ongoing construction processes and tendencies of functional transformation, rather

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than through directly observable data. Due to the fact that a significant portion of buildings in Antakya is still under construction, direct observation of interior use has not been possible. Therefore, interior space is evaluated not as a completed experiential domain but as a potential spatial construct in the process of redefinition. In contrast, in the case of Bari, it is observed that interior spatial organization has been largely preserved due to the continuity of residential use, thereby supporting overall spatial continuity.

The primary aim of comparatively examining Antakya and Bari is to make visible two distinct conditions: one in which spatial continuity has been disrupted and another in which it has been preserved. Through this comparison, the study demonstrates that, in the sustainability of urban identity, continuity of use and spatial relationships play a more decisive role than mere physical reconstruction.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that the physical condition, patterns of use, and spatial continuity of historic structures differ significantly between Antakya and Bari. In particular, the ongoing reconstruction process in Antakya results in an urban structure that is fragmented and transitional, rather than a fully established and cohesive spatial whole.

4.1. Findings from Antakya: Spatial Structure in Process

It has been observed that a significant portion of the historic structures examined in Antakya sustained severe damage as a result of the earthquake, and that many of them were completely destroyed. Field investigations indicate that, in some cases, only façades or portions of load-bearing walls remain standing, while other structures have entered the reconstruction process (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Figure 1. Post-Earthquake Destruction in Antakya (Photos by the author.)

Figure 2. Post-Earthquake Construction Site in Antakya (Photos by the author.)

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In structures undergoing reconstruction, it is observed that traditional stone materials are partially preserved yet used in combination with newly introduced building elements. This indicates that the continuity of original materiality has been maintained only to a limited extent, while construction techniques have undergone transformation.

At the street scale, analyses reveal that the continuity of the urban fabric has been disrupted following the destruction, and that urban blocks exhibit a fragmented spatial configuration. Vacant parcels, construction sites, and incomplete structures emerge as primary factors weakening spatial integrity (Figure 3). This condition suggests that spatial continuity is still in the process of being re-established.

Figure 3. Post-Earthquake Street Condition in Antakya (Photos by the author.)

In terms of use, it has been identified that many structures are not actively occupied, and that their functions have either not yet been defined or are in the process of being redefined. This situation creates a temporary disruption in the continuity of urban life and indicates that spatial identity is currently undergoing a process of reformation.

At the façade scale, observations reveal that while reconstructed buildings partially reference the original façade organization, differences have emerged in terms of proportions, detailing, and material usage (Figure 4). This suggests that physical reconstruction alone is insufficient to ensure spatial continuity.

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Figure 4. Restored Structure in Antakya After the Earthquake (Photos by the author.)

4.2. Findings from Bari: Spatial Structure with Preserved Continuity

It has been observed that the structures located in the historic center of Bari have largely preserved their physical integrity. The buildings maintain their original character in terms of façade composition, materiality, and proportions (Figure 5, Figure 6).

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Figure 5. Street in Bari Old City (Città Vecchia) (URL-1-2-3-4-5-6)

Figure 6. Façade in Bari Old City (Città Vecchia) (URL-7-8-9-10)

In terms of use, it has been determined that the buildings predominantly maintain their residential function, while limited commercial use is also present. Commercial activities are generally located on the ground floors, whereas residential use continues on the upper floors. This condition indicates that functional continuity supports spatial continuity.

At the street scale, analyses reveal that buildings are positioned in a coherent manner, forming an uninterrupted spatial continuity. The street fabric exhibits a homogeneous character, with structures collectively forming an integrated whole.

In terms of intensity of use, it is observed that the streets are actively utilized, everyday life practices persist, and urban life demonstrates continuity (Figure 7). This finding

indicates that spatial continuity is not solely physical but also fundamentally grounded in patterns of use.

Figure 7. Use Patterns in Bari Old City (Città Vecchia) (URL-11-12-13-14-15)

4.3. Comparative Findings: The Distinction Between Continuity and Disruption

The comparison between Antakya and Bari reveals two distinct urban conditions: one characterized by the presence of spatial continuity and the other by its disruption.

In Antakya:

- physical continuity has been disrupted,
- a significant portion of the structures has been destroyed or remains under reconstruction,
- functions are undefined or temporary,
- spatial integrity has been fragmented.

In Bari:

- buildings have been physically preserved,
- functional continuity has been maintained,
- façade and material integrity have been sustained,
- the street fabric remains uninterrupted.

These findings indicate that, in the preservation of historic fabric, continuity of use and spatial relationships are more decisive than mere physical existence. While the situation observed in Antakya reflects a process in which spatial continuity is being re-established, the case of Bari demonstrates that maintaining such continuity is a fundamental factor in the sustainability of urban identity.

This comparison highlights that spatial continuity should not be understood solely in terms of the presence of structures but must be addressed in conjunction with patterns of use, street relationships, and overall spatial integrity.

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The comparative analysis presented in Table 1 systematically demonstrates the decisive role of spatial and functional continuity in shaping urban identity.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Historic Urban Fabric in Antakya and Bari in Terms of Spatial and Functional Continuity

CRITERIA	ANTAKYA (Process-Oriented Condition)	BARI (Continuity Condition)	EVALUATION
Building Condition	Destruction and ongoing reconstruction process	Largely preserved	Physical continuity has been disrupted in Antakya, while it has been maintained in Bari
Functional Condition	Functions undefined / in transformation process	Predominantly residential with continuous use	Functional continuity is strong in Bari, whereas it has not yet been established in Antakya
Façade Integrity	Partially reconstructed / subject to interventions	Original façades preserved	In Antakya, façade reconstruction remains insufficient to ensure continuity
Material Use	Combination of new and old materials	Continuity of traditional materials	Material continuity is preserved in Bari, while it is undergoing transformation in Antakya
Street Fabric	Fragmented / discontinuous	Continuous and coherent urban fabric	Spatial continuity is interrupted in Antakya, whereas it is continuous in Bari
Intensity of Use	Low / limited	Active daily use	Continuity of use is observed only in Bari
Spatial Continuity	In the process of re-establishment	Preserved	Antakya represents an ongoing process, while Bari presents a completed continuity
Interior Space Condition	Not yet defined / potential	Preserved through continuity of use	Urban identity is being re-established in Antakya, while it is sustained in Bari
Urban Identity	In the process of reformation	Preserved and sustainable	Urban identity is being reconstructed in Antakya, whereas continuity is maintained in Bari

5. RESULTS

In Antakya, it has been observed that a large proportion of historic structures were completely destroyed following the earthquake, while a significant number are currently undergoing reconstruction. The remaining structures are being rehabilitated and refunctionalized through repair and restoration efforts. This condition indicates that physical continuity has been disrupted and that the existing urban structure represents an ongoing process of reconstitution rather than a completed spatial whole.

In terms of façade organization, it is evident that reconstructed buildings adopt an approach that references the original architectural language. However, the current state of construction results in a fragmented street fabric, revealing that spatial continuity has not yet been fully re-established. Vacant parcels, construction sites, and incomplete structures emerge as key spatial indicators of this disruption. From a functional perspective, it is observed that many buildings are not yet actively in use, and that functions are either undefined or only partially maintained. This situation points to a temporary interruption in the continuity of urban life.

In contrast, in the historic center of Bari, buildings have largely preserved their physical integrity. It is observed that façades maintain their original architectural characteristics and are situated within a cohesive spatial framework. The preservation of façade integrity contributes to an uninterrupted spatial continuity within the street fabric.

From the perspective of use, buildings in Bari are actively occupied, and everyday life practices continue uninterrupted. The continuity of residential use, along with the balanced integration of limited commercial functions, emerges as a key factor supporting spatial continuity.

A comparison of the two cities reveals that, in Antakya, the historic fabric is still in the process of reconstruction and spatial continuity remains disrupted, whereas in Bari, physical, functional, and spatial continuity are preserved, allowing urban life to persist. These findings demonstrate that, in the sustainability of historic fabric, continuity of use and spatial integrity are more decisive than physical reconstruction alone.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In Antakya, it has been observed that the historic urban fabric has been severely damaged not only by natural disasters such as earthquakes but also by human-induced factors, including neglect and inadequate conservation practices. This situation is considered to have weakened the sense of belonging between users and urban space, while also negatively affecting the city's tourism potential. In contrast, in the case of Bari, the limited impact of natural disasters, combined with consistent planning, regulation, and patterns of use, has enabled the preservation of the historic fabric. This continuity supports not only basic needs such as housing and commerce but also cultural and emotional needs, thereby sustaining urban life.

The findings indicate that the preservation of historic fabric plays a decisive role in the sustainability of urban identity. In this context, the resilience of urban identity is not solely dependent on the physical existence of structures but is directly related to the continuity of use and spatial integrity. Therefore, the preservation and continued use of historic structures can be considered a fundamental component in sustaining both the tangible and intangible values of the city.

An examination of the underlying causes of the current condition in Antakya suggests the influence of multidimensional factors such as lack of planning, insufficient regulation, disaster impact, and economic pressures. In contrast, in Bari, approaches such as the continuity of residential use, a principle of limited intervention, and the preservation of façade integrity emerge as key factors supporting the continuity of historic fabric. This contrast demonstrates that, in the sustainability of urban identity, not only physical conservation approaches but also patterns of use and spatial continuity are decisive.

One of the main limitations of this study is that, due to the fact that a large proportion of buildings in Antakya are still under construction, interior spatial experience and user practices could not be directly observed. Therefore, the study adopts a process-oriented framework rather than a result-oriented evaluation, focusing on the dynamics of re-establishing spatial continuity. In this context, interior space is not considered as a completed experiential domain but as a potential spatial construct in the process of redefinition. This limitation also presents an important area for future research, where the role of interior space and user experience in shaping post-disaster urban identity can be examined more comprehensively.

In conclusion, it is understood that the sustainability of urban identity in post-disaster reconstruction processes cannot be achieved solely through physical reproduction. Instead, continuity of use, spatial relationships, and holistic conservation approaches must be addressed together. Accordingly, the preservation of historic structures should go beyond

mere protection and involve their sustained and balanced use, which emerges as a fundamental requirement for achieving a more resilient and sustainable urban identity. In this context, future interventions should prioritize maintaining functional continuity and user-based spatial practices.

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