The full multimedia project is available to view at:
http://rojava-story.herokuapp.com/
An unknown entity rose out of the war in Syria – Rojava. As the world’s attention fixated on the Kurds’ fight against ISIS, their revolution began to restructure society along democratic confederalist ideals.

The built environment, therefore, had to follow suite.

KKH research conducted in northern Syria examined the politics of space in society-building and revolution, and explored the rise and fall of the Commune, architecture’s role in state-building, as well as memory and destruction.

The multimedia project is an intersection, both in the methodology and its outcomes, between journalism, architectural research, and storytelling.
In 30 degree heat and with the ground simmering, US-led coalition continues attacking ISIS positions along the Euphrates river. Nearby, Kurdish and Arab sniper teams engage their targets; routinely, the deep shock of distant explosions reverberate through the air. Two hundred meters away, on the other side of a grassy field is what is left of the so called Islamic State.

Less than five years ago, ISIS controlled around half of all Syrian territory, while horror stories of their rise and reign echoed around the world. After the defeat of ISIS in 2019 in an area of northern Syria known to Kurds as Rojava (meaning West), the territory was fully controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council.

Rojava announced its autonomy soon after the breakout of the Syrian civil war in 2011. For years, Kurds in the region have strived to implement utopian direct democracy goals, so that the rule would lie in the hands of the citizen-led communes.

Yet, after the Kurds’ security guarantor, the US, declared its withdrawal from Syria in October 2019, Kurds’ political aspirations face extinction in the face of a Turkish-led invasion in northern Syria and the return of Assad forces.

Following eight years of all out conflict, what does this revolution look like up close? And what kind of society did the Kurds manage to built amid revolution and war?

**Between Tigris and Euphrates**
November 2018.

The Tigris river, which divides Iraq and Syria, is the the only de facto border crossing into Rojava. As a motorboat makes its way across the torrent, Rojava’s yellow-red-green tricolour flutters in the autumn wind on the other side.

The long road on the other side stretches across mostly desolate Syrian plains, with the seven-hour long journey to Kobane interrupted by isolated checkpoints and destroyed villages. Rebuilt homes are tens of kilometres apart, and several refugee camps dot the landscape.

Samelka border crossing with Iraqi Kurdistan is an economic lifeline for Rojava.

Destroyed buildings and villages dot the landscape in northern Syria.

The horizon is filled with black smoke from the burning crude oil that produces fuel oil, the end product used as a substitute for diesel. The same smell also fills the inside of your car and your mouth following each cough. As the evening approaches, the road winds down from a hill and onto the glaring Turkish concrete border on the other side of Kobane – the epicentre of the Kurdish revolution in Rojava.
Kurdish mobilisation in Rojava began in 2011, just as the Syrian uprising was spiralling into a civil war. Institutions that had worked underground for years suddenly emerged into public view, laying the foundations for an autonomous Kurdish project in northern Syria. The Kurds had risen up for their rights several times in the past, and only in 2011 did Bashar al-Assad grant Syrian citizenship to all Kurds. Until then, according to the Kurds themselves, they were second-class citizens, and the socioeconomic development of their region was suppressed.

In 2012, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) took over the control of Kobane, Amuda and
Afrin in northern Syria. Kurdish territories continued to expand, and according to Chatham House analysts, it’s likely that the Kurds reached an agreement with Assad early on. In exchange for allowing the Kurdish autonomy to take shape, Assad was able to withdraw Syrian troops to fight other rebels and also maintain the control of Qamishli town square and airport, as well as the central area in Hasakah city.

The authorities in Rojava announced its constitution in 2014. Even before then, communes organised the first elections and chose delegates for local assemblies and other self-governing bodies. In 2016, Rojava became known as the Democratic Northern Syria Federation, which later became North-Eastern Syrian Autonomous Administration (NES). Above it, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) is used as an umbrella term to encompass both the autonomous administration, and potentially, other Syrian rebel regions in the future. Throughout Rojava, the SDC flag and insignia are endorsed as the official representative elements of Rojava, including in the newly established political capital in Ain Issa town. Although despite the changes, the name Rojava is still used among the Kurds.

Now, the Syrian Democratic Council is made up of the North-Eastern Syrian Autonomous Administration – which includes the whole of Rojava – and the Afrin region, which was separated in January 2018 by Turkish forces and their Syrian National Army (SNA) proxies.

The region’s economy is dependent on oil reserves near the border with Iraq and around the basin of the Euphrates River, which also demarcates the southern edge of the Kurdish-led project. Prior to the Syrian conflict, oil from the region was brought to the Mediterranean coast and refinery facilities in Latakia, where it would be readied for export.

Kurds lack the heavy industry that stayed under Assad control near the Mediterranean, and therefore, can only produce fuel oil as a rudimentary substitute for diesel. Meanwhile, the Kurdish authorities also export crude oil to areas under Assad rule, which remains a controversial question among the Kurds. Caravans of oil tankers on their way to Damascus constitute an important economic lifeline for both the Kurds, but also the Assad regime.
What does Kobane look like today?

A majority of the buildings destroyed in the war have been rebuilt, and multi-storey construction projects are emerging front and center. Before the war, around 40,000 people used to live here. It’s unclear how many remain today.

The bars open at night draw both locals and foreigners who work for international demining, medical or other NGOs. In the central street, commerce is thriving – fumes from fuel oil generators permeate the crowds of shoppers. Mannequins draped with imported clothes from Turkey, soap from Aleppo, and sweets from Damascus are lined up for display on the sidewalks. Also for sale are souvenirs including cups and keychains which bare the symbols and colours of the Kurdish revolution.

To understand how the uprising started, it’s important to speak to the person who saw it all. She is Adla Bakir, the head of KongraStar branch in Kobane that advocates for women’s rights across Rojava. In her 40s, Bakir joined the revolution as soon as the Kurdish mobilisation began in 2011.
We pass gates protected by armed women and sit down inside a dimly-lit room heated by a fuel oil stove. Portraits of women killed in the fight against ISIS stare down from the walls of her office. After taking a sip of tea, Bakir turns back to 2011.

One of the fundamental principles of the revolution was the liberation of women. “Before 2011, women were only at home and in the kitchen, and after, we could participate in councils and could help the society,” says Bakir. As the uprising in Syria began, people were coming out en masse to gather in squares, school yards and out in the streets. Many, like Bakir herself, put their hands on their hearts and swore an oath to serve the people. According to her, the more people joined the uprising, the more others wanted to take part.

“We held meetings in squares, schoolyards, and inside big tents,” she says. In line with David Harvey’s argument that the central squares are points for spontaneous eruption, the limited open spaces that the Kurds had under the Syrian regime quickly became the focal points of their revolution.
“The street is a public space that has historically often been transformed by social action into the common of revolutionary movement, as well as into a site of bloody suppression,” wrote David Harvey in Rebel Cities.

Witness testimonies from Rojava describe, rather poetically, how masses of people streamed into the roundabouts, reminiscent of Tahrir Square uprising in Egypt or other central-square fueled movements during the so-called Arab Spring. On Kobane’s streets, trained cadres were beginning to organise the local people. For the first time after decades of oppression, Kurdish institutions were mobilising up from the underground to lead the revolutionary push.

People gave an oath standing in front of the crowds, says Bakir, who also held her hand on the heart and chanted, “we promise, we promise, we promise”.

Only in 2011, Bakir recalls, the Kurds began establishing communes, one for roughly 100 families in the area. “Generally,” she says, “communes were able to take political decisions, bottom up”.

This model of decentralised self-organising, labelled Democratic Confederalism, was to become the foundation of the revolution, according to Abdullah Öcalan, Rojava’s ideological leader and one of the founding members of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). With communes at its core, this model of governance would concentrate the power in people’s hands at the bottom, rather than government control from the top.

“The state continuously orientates itself towards centralism in order to pursue the interests of the power monopolies,” Öcalan wrote from his prison cell in Turkey. “Just the opposite is true of confederalism. Not the monopolies but the society is at the center of political focus.” Throughout Rojava, his smiling, moustached portraits hang in every checkpoint, home, and institution.
This model of thinking was in large part influenced by Murray Bookchin, an anarchist theorist from New York who was greatly admired by Abdullah Öcalan. The latter even professed being a “student” of Bookchin, and exchanged letters from his prison cell with the unlikely ideologue from across the Atlantic.

Öcalan would later call on PKK fighters to read Bookchin, with the group later forming “clandestine assemblies immediately in Syria, Iraq and Turkey, waiting for the opportunity to expand,” according to the New York Times. The opportunity came in 2011 as the revolution in Syria began, but Bookchin passed away in 2006 and too early to witness the early strives taken to achieve the vision shared with Öcalan.

“[Bookchin] was the greatest social scientist of the 20th century,” a tribute issued by the PKK in July 2006 read, according to the New York Times. “Bookchin has not died [...] we undertake to make [him] live in our struggle.”

Bookchin advocated for a concentrated decentralised power as a way to achieve a democratic society, contrary to the nation state, where, as he saw it, the oppression of women, toxic urbanisation and top-down rule stood at the core.

The initial self-organisation in Rojava was prompted by the physical establishment of communes and representative bodies that no longer had to operate underground. By politicising their meeting spaces, the Kurds in Kobane were able to start building a political programme. The initial spaces for CominGas, the meeting places for several communes at a time, were either donated, rented or reappropriated, according to Bakir.
What creates a democratic space, and can it be achieved through form?

The question can be explored via simple imagery, conceptualising a dozen chairs in an empty room – a miniature for a typical European parliamentary building.

Is the space only a room, until some chairs are placed inside and arranged in a semicircle, transforming the room into a forum, a place for decisions, a political and a democratic space? Or does it simply remain a room with some chairs arranged in a semicircle? Can a room be a political space by simply remaining a room with several people meeting inside, thus making the space political through the programme applied within, and not the shape or form applied to it?

With no time to construct purpose-built political spaces, as per the analogy above, the latter scenario proved to be the outcome for Rojava. In the midst of revolution and war, it is almost trivial whether the decision on how best to integrate the communes into the urban fabric was taken out of simple necessity or ideological purity.

By comparison the Assad regime have transcribed its power onto the built fabric with the same straight lines and over-scaled institutions as in monarchic or colonial Europe. The Kurdish communes, in essence, split from the power projection of the “state rationalism,” as defined by Lefebvre, and made political space inclusive by bringing it down to the citizen level.

The Kurds did reappropriate governmental spaces formerly controlled by Assad, and in some cases, simply took over the institutions and changed its programmes to serve the revolution.

Returning to the previous empty space and a dozen chairs analogy, the communes opted to achieve democratic space not by merely establishing an open environment, but also by
linking it with a specific function. “Representations of space must therefore have a substantial role and a specific influence in the production of space,” wrote Lefebvre.

Whether for ideological reasons, or more likely functionality, Rojava’s authorities coupled the physical commune space with first aid facilities and gathering points for society’s self-defence forces.

The communes that formed the backbone of the self-governing structure in Rojava in 2011 recall the early Soviets in 1917 Russia, 19th century Parisian, or revolutionary Spanish communes in the 1930s.

The communes in most, if not all, of these historic cases attempted to usurp the power from the centrist powers at the top, and move the decision-making to the workplace, the council, and/or the citizen-delegate level, if summarised simplistically. These self-organisation structures had to become a counterweight to totalitarian regimes of any colour, and open the path to direct democracy, according to Öcalan.

The communes, made up of around 100 household representatives, were instrumental in taking the first political and self-defence steps in Rojava. The network of communes in Rojava, as well as their internal make up, laid the groundwork for legislative elections. They also made possible the selection of representatives to Mala Gel (People’s Houses) and Mala Jinan (Women’s Houses), which were usually based in Assad government buildings.

The mobilisation and creation of this new web of communes was happening simultaneously across all areas of the cities in villages in the regions. Alongside the Kurds in Rojava, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Chechens, Yazidis, and other ethnic minorities were to take part. Although it’s difficult to piece together exactly how the first direct-democracy tools functioned, there is enough information to draw a general picture.
The initial commune-led structure

One of the main instruments that allowed the initial mobilisation to take place was Movement for Democratic Society (TEV DEM). Although, according to Chatham House analysts, the network was dominated by the same majority party in Rojava today, the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Party (PYD), it still included other various political parties, activists, trade unions and people with a political education or ideological understanding. The movement organised the first elections via the communes, and was directly involved in structuring the initial self-government apparatus.

Finally, these local direct-democracy bodies – whose responsibilities shifted many times in reaction to the war with ISIS or Turkey’s incursions into northern Syria – had to spread across Rojava and, in this way, enable the citizen-led governing to take shape.

One of the most comprehensive books about the revolution and its early structures was co-authored by Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga. Material they gathered showed that the communes were active in every street of larger towns, and individual areas of smaller towns. They included committees on services and self-defence, where every citizen would take part, and all decisions would influence the daily lives of the local residents.

Communes would choose their delegates to People’s Houses, which were made up of 30 to 400 family representatives; they also choose delegates to the parallel Women’s Houses that dealt with issues and violations surrounding women’s rights. Representatives from People’s Houses would then be elected or nominated up to the City Council. The council would choose representatives to the Municipalities, which mostly dealt with city-wide servicing issues. Delegates from all cities and regions would congregate at the People’s Council of West Kurdistan, which existed until 2016. And that’s only the political process.

There were various committees, for example on cooperatives and the economy, which were tasked with carrying out the decision-making from the committees at the commune level, to the same committees on upper tiers.

Communes and self-defence

“If only the state can protect you, they will exploit you.”
On a rainy November 2018 evening we stand around a makeshift checkpoint at one of the entrances to Kobane. On both sides of the street, members of the Society Self-Defence Forces check the incoming vehicles. Several blocks away, a three-meter ditch rings the city giving it the appearance of a medieval castle.

When the revolution began, communes organised self-protection forces in each city district and in each village. This citizen’s militia organised patrols in the streets, but also helped fill the gaps in the frontline when the fight against ISIS and other Islamist groups began. These self-protection forces were mostly made up of experienced men and women, who were trusted by the local community.

The physical commune, or rather, CominGas were also instrumental in helping this self-organisation take place. “We held a big meeting in each neighbourhood to gather [the fighters],” says Osman, one of the commanders in the self-defence force who only gives his first name. “Some guys volunteered, and others were [nominated].”
This force follows the revolutionary theory that “every society needs to have self-protection forces separated from the official structures,” says Osman’s colleague, Sardar. Each commune now has between three and 10 self-defence fighters, who come together in their central headquarters to coordinate patrols and actions. According to Osman, the force came a long way since the uprising began, when they functioned in the same ad-hoc way as most other institutions in Rojava.

On September 13, 2014, ISIS reached the Kobane city barricades. The Kurds were squeezed on one side by the closed Turkish border, and attacked by ISIS from the three other directions. The situation became critical. ISIS forces almost fully controlled Kobane, while few hundred meters away, Turkish forces watched the Kurds’ defeat from the other side of the border.

Several weeks later on September 27, 2014, US-led coalition began attacking ISIS from the air, which led to the defeat of ISIS, but also marked the beginning of America’s entanglement in northern Syria that made the Kurds reliant on US support. Kobane spent entire weeks surrounded by ISIS, hundreds died and thousands of civilians crossed the border into Turkey – many ended up staying there. From this moment onward the revolution began to crumble.

According to virtually all government officials and activists interviewed in November 2018, Rojava was faced with an acute lack of motivated and educated people to pick up where the revolution had left off.

**Realpolitik and the constant change**
Rojava’s self-administration structure changed many times, and the number of committees decreased from 22 to 14, Co-chair of Kobane Council Walid Omar said in November 2018. However, other local representatives claimed the number stood at 10, which again illustrates the ongoing confusion in the governing mechanism. Additionally, the relationship between direct democracy instruments, the communes, and the general assembly – Rojava’s so-called parliament – as well as the Executive Council remains blurry to this day.

My translator, a local Kurd from Kobane, Muslem, sits next to Adla Bakir in the KongraStar building. He also took part in the revolution early on. He worked as a journalist and represented a Kurdish language institution in one of the local councils, as “our language was repressed during Bashar al-Assad’s time”.

This period of the revolution between 2011 and the first skirmishes against armed Islamist groups in 2013, even before ISIS, Muslem remembers as “the most beautiful time that I have ever experienced”. Although it was difficult, people felt that they had freed themselves from the Assad regime, and the lives of many of their friends and family members were yet to be taken by the approaching war, he says.

According to Muslem, this period before 2013 involved all the people that were previously barred by Assad from the political process. Then, even the everyday decisions – such as establishing the self-protection forces – could be influenced by each resident that attended commune meetings. Although, he says, communes and People’s Houses even then mostly dealt with the most pressing issues of utilities and services.

Step by step, the commune-led process had to spread across the three Kurdish revolution centers in Afrin, near the Mediterranean Sea, Kobane, in the centre of northern Syria, and Qamishli near the Iraqi border.
The fall of the Commune

However, the commune-led utopian dream didn’t materialise.

Back in KongraStar offices in Kobane, Adla Bakir often repeats the words “party” and “administration”. She admits the revolution was spearheaded by Rojava’s majority PYD party. The organisation is suspected of having close links with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which officially does not have representation in Rojava. One major thread connecting the two is the shared ideological leader Abdullah Öcalan, one of the PKK founders.

Although various parties took part in the early stages of the uprising, both Bakir and Muslem say that PYD had a better understanding and connection with the local people than the other parties. Critics say that more resolute opponents of PYD were simply pushed out.

Human Rights Watch published a damning report in 2014 on human rights abuses in “PYD-run enclaves” that later unified across Rojava. The report stressed the “harassment and arbitrary arrests of the PYD’s Kurdish political rivals,” although the authors did say the allegations were addressed by PYD who promised due diligence, and in one case, sentenced an officer in the local police force, the Assayish, to life-imprisonment for the death of a detainee.

According to local Kurds, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and women-only YPJ were also often led by PKK fighters, who returned from Turkey when the revolution began. And although the communes were the leading instruments in the beginning of the revolution, many Kurds claim the real power seeps behind the closed doors of the leading PYD party. Already in 2018, People’s House as a separate body no longer existed.
Turkey leverages the undefined connection between the Syrian Kurdish institutions and the PKK for propaganda, defining Rojava authorities as an extension of the PKK, and therefore, a terrorist organisation. The EU and the US also define the PKK as a terrorist organisation, however, they support the administration in Rojava.

During a critical moment in October 2015, Rojava’s YPG military merged into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) made up of Kurdish, Arab and other ethnic fighters from across northern Syria. It was an important rhetorical step that allowed the Western-led coalition to claim they are supporting pro-democracy rebels in their fight against ISIS, and not a terrorist organisation as Turkey claimed.

In early 2018, Turkey together with its National Syrian Army proxies invaded and separated the Afrin region from the other cantons in Rojava. Realpolitik led Kurds to regroup, establish a capital in Ain Issa and limit their ambitions to an autonomy within the current state of Syria.

The establishment of a capital contradicted the ideology of direct democracy, localism and commune-led governing. Therefore, the move was in conflict with both the ideas of Bookchin and the early plans laid out by Öcalan.

Some Kurds in Kobane claimed that the communes today are only instruments to monitor and keep track of people in Rojava. Berivan Issa, who works in the Kobane municipality sees that as an advantage, but also indirectly reveals why this could be problematic. “Communes are a point of reference, because if I, for example, want to employ a person and
I know nothing about him, the communes will know everything”.

Democratic confederalism ideals veered off. According to Kurds in Kobane, the commune-led process was brief, and now, the 13 CominGas are more akin to small administrative centres where people can receive rationed fuel coupons, while posters of a smiling Öcalan look down at them from the walls.

The communes were impeding and slowing down decision-making and the Kurds were forced to regroup and consolidate their governing structures, according to Fawzie Abdni. She is the co-chair of the regional Legislative Assembly, the regional parliament in Kobane, which represents one of the Syrian Democratic Council territories, the Euphrates Federation.

Abdni recalls how in the early stages of the revolution engulfed by chaos, the citizen-led communes were the most important drivers of the early mobilisation. However, as time passed, they needed to better coordinate the process. “Now the society has the same idea politically and socially,” says Abdni. She claims she is an independent politician, however, at least two other people in Kobane said she is closely linked with the majority PYD party, and therefore, follows the party line.

The consolidation of Rojava’s governing structures began in 2014 that would move political decision-making away from the communes.

Following the commune-enabled elections, the Legislative Assembly (the regional parliament) met for the first time on January 21, 2014, and was made up of 61 members from Kobane, including five people as the managing board.

“Six days later on January 27, the Executive Council [the regional government] was founded, which was enabled by the Legislative Assembly,” she says. “It had 21 ministries and the assembly’s role was to oversee the Executive Council.”
The first lawmakers were politicians, “civil society members, and some workers,” she says. In the end, the Legislative Assembly was made up of “TEV DEM plus four political parties active in Kobane, plus people from the civil society and independents,” she says.

Therefore, following the first general elections in 2015, the self-administration was consolidated into the hands of elected politicians and activists, away from the communes that served their apparent role of election-enablers. Kurds blame Turkey that no future elections to Legislative Assembly took place, due to Ankara’s invasion of Afrin in early 2018, which resulted in the laceration of a third of Rojava’s lands, and with it, a chunk of Rojava’s electorate.

“The other legislative assembly elections had to take place in January or February 2018, but the process stopped due to Turkey’s invasion into Afrin,” says Abdni. The last regional, municipal and city-level council elections before the process grinded to a halt took place in 2017, according to Abdni.

The General Assembly, or the parliament for the whole of Rojava based in Ain Issa, includes “seven members, nominated by the [regional] Legislative Assembly,” according to Abdni. Additionally, one member is elected from the Kobane Legislative Assembly by the General Assembly in Ain Issa to be permanently stationed there, forming the link between the all-Rojava parliament, the General Assembly, and regional-level parliaments, the Legislative Assemblies, according to Abdni.

As for the role of the communes, Abdni toupples Rojavas ideological, commune-led facade: “Communes now only deal with services.”

“During the period of communes, government was inactive. But as the role of the Legislative Assembly increased, the role of the communes decreased,” she says. “It's normal that the revolution left some elements behind.”

“Not all management [elements] could co-exist with ideology,” she adds.

How did the political decision-making slip from the communes and into the hands of the majority PYD party, which are now entrenched in Rojava’s elected governance? If we accept, of course, that the party was never fully guiding the process in the first place. Previously, the direct-democracy line ran through the aforementioned TEV DEM, Movement for Democratic Society. However, some Kurds and other Syrian rebels were skeptical of TEV DEM's programme and it was not invited to the Geneva peace process due to the alleged links with the Assad regime, according to Chatham House analysts.

During the last meeting in August 2018, TEV DEM decided to withdraw from the governing structures and instead focus on coordinating the various trade unions and branches of the civil society. Some saw this as a strategic step, others as a sign that only the PYD can govern Rojava.

“The Legislative Assembly [parliament] is made up by many people, including unions, and all unions are part of TEV DEM,” says Shaheen Alali, co-chair of TEV DEM’s judicial branch in Kobane. He also added that they came under no pressure to step away from governing. However, a critical difference arose – TEV DEM will now only supervise, and not organise decision making from the bottom-up.

"If the government doesn’t listen, the syndicates can stage demonstrations,” says Alali, indicating that the only tool to affect top level decision-making would, again, be mere demonstrations. This, in the worst case scenario, would catapult the revolutionary project back to observer status. “We know that the most important decisions are made elsewhere,"
wrote Lefebvre, which “creates a sense of disappointment in urban reality”. This may be the unfortunate end for TEV DEM’s revolutionary aspirations.

Learning from the Soviet Union’s mistakes

“We were warned about the Soviet Union example. If you will have to rely on illiterate and uneducated people, the same destiny will await us as that of the Soviet Union,” says Alali. “Most educated people left the Rojava project, because we couldn’t pay salaries.”

Many Kurds say that the communes were functioning until the ISIS onslaught, after which the project simply lacked educated people who either left or were killed. “When the local government was established, most people and administrators had no experience,” says Alali.

He admits that not all centralisation effects are negative. “Before the governing system was complicated,” he says. “For example, we had five different health protection committees,” which led to some local corruption. “In the future, we will try to decrease the number of councils.”

Now Rojava’s political project has become more similar to a simple, yet functioning, representative democracy that doesn’t differ much from European parliamentary structures.

“It has always been fashionable to look for models of social institutions in the so-called ‘proletarian’ revolutions of the past hundred years,” wrote Murray Bookchin, the anarchist theorist from New York. “The Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian soviets of 1905 and 1917, the Spanish revolutionary syndicates of the 1930s, and the Hungarian councils of 1956 have all been raked over for examples of future social organisations.” Yet, they have very little in common, “other than their limitations as mediated forms”. The Paris Commune of 1871, “the commune itself, viewed as a structural entity, was little more than a popular municipal council [...] the Commune was hardly more advanced than the municipal bodies in
the US today," he wrote.

But in Rojava, the fact that its structures may be no more radical than functioning European models, is in itself an unprecedented success achieved in such a short time and surrounded by conflict, although somewhat further away from the initial utopian communalism ideas.

Much criticism is levelled against Rojava because there is a tendency to look at the revolution and the subsequent self-administration as a state-actor, even though it never was. By applying the same nation-state criteria, observers both validate the progress of Rojava, but also use a sky-high benchmark to measure the Kurds’ ability to build their revolution up to the level of a functioning state.

Bookchin argues that council modes of organising labour, especially in factories, cannot be the end-goal, as “no revolution can settle for councils or committees as its final [...] mode of social organisation”. The factory committees, which could be considered in the form of political representation as well, are “vitally important as an initial form of economic administration”. Therefore, this supports the point repeatedly stressed across Rojava – its revolution is in flux and the constant readjustments came in response to the mostly external pressures. Therefore, the communes may have served the “initial form of [...] administration,” along the lines of Bookchin’s argument, by allowing elections to take place.

“Elected or nominated people in communes were not educated enough to move the project along,” says TEV DEM’s Alali. “The main function [now] is to educate how to deal with the commune and how to manage themselves.”

According to Alali, the communes were easy to mobilise at the beginning of the uprising, which served the initial goal of choosing delegates for the Legislative Assembly and other structures. However, the commune responsibilities today end with small-scale bureaucratic functions.
In 2018, Rojava’s project once again changed. At the time of the writing in October 2019, northern Syria is controlled by Syrian Democratic Council with its new capital in Ain Issa. The future of the project is reflected by its flag – all of Syrian territory with the Euphrates river demarcating the borders of SDC. This self-administration incorporates Kurdish, as well as Arab regions north of Euphrates, and seeks to coexist with Assad regime in the current composition of Syria

Walid Omar, Co-chair of the Kobane Council, says that the Rojava project is in “the process of change,” and with the establishment of Ain Issa capital, “we are renewing our programme”. Already previously, the “legislative assembly was not directly elected by the people, but [made up of people nominated by the communes and the trade unions],” says Omar. But the role of “the centralised [state] will only be to coordinate the 10 ministries in Kobane, Deir Ezzor, and elsewhere”.

“Now all of our political decisions are taken by the SDC,” which superseded the Legislative Assembly, he says. “We never think that the communes will be abolished, because the main topical issues are discussed there.”

However, Anwar Muslim, Co-chair of the Executory Council (the regional government) of the Euphrates Confederation region part of SDC, adds: “Political decisions will only be taken in Ain Issa”. This corresponds with the view among many Kurds in Kobane that the communes are only useful to deal with utility and service issues.

And although Kobane Municipality Co-chair Öcelan Isso says that a meeting takes place every month between the commune centres (CominGas), the city council and the municipality, during which the communes raise issues to be solved by the municipality and the city council, it wasn’t possible to verify the claim in November 2018.

Meanwhile, Labour Ministry Co-chair Berivan Hassan at the Executive Council (the all-Rojava government) in Ain Issa says that the mechanism stopping full centralisation exists. “Cooperation can only work one step up,” and not from top to bottom, she says.

“Problems move from a commune committee to the relevant municipality committee, to [city or area] council committee and then to an SDC ministry,” says Hassan. Yet it’s unclear whether this happens across the wide range of political questions, or remains focused on issues surrounding services and utilities only.

The founding of the early communes allowed elections and the creation of upper governing tiers to take shape. This view is supported by many of the local people interviewed during
the course of this research, as well as by representatives of the upper governing structures, although contested by some activists, including Shaheen Alali from TEV DEM.

“The fact remains that council modes of organisation are not immune to centralisation, manipulation and perversion,” wrote Murray Bookchin. “At best, they can be the stepping stone to decentralised society – at worst, they can easily be integrated into hierarchical forms of social organisation.”

It’s unclear whether the communes were subverted and incorporated into hierarchical structures. However, it is clear that the role of the commune as a revolutionary enabler no longer exists. As to the reason why, the majority of interviewed activists and people on all tiers of the self-administration point to the war with ISIS, which led to brain drain and outright massacre of Rojava’s revolutionaries.

Trauma, memory, and reconstruction

The biggest hit to Kobane came on June 25, 2015. Several months after defeating ISIS, hundreds of Islamic State fighters sneaked back into town during the night and began a massacre. Over 300 people were killed, mostly civilians. Fighting in the city lasted three days, and the image of bloated bodies lying in the sun have entrenched in the local people’s memories.

Much has been written on space and PTSD. Both on how the built environment is used to counter trauma – by providing open, clean and tranquil places – and on how memories transcribed onto the urban fabric can forever carry the emotional legacy.

"In part, we recognise our place in the world by an interaction with the built environment and remembering these experiences and by being informed of the experience of others: the creation of social identity located in time and place," wrote Bevan in Destruction of Memory.

In November 2018, several spaces in Kobane were aiming to reinforce the local social identity that had been suppressed for years by Assad and later faced annihilation by ISIS. Namely, a private library of a slain family and the House of Martyrs – with commemorative
spaces and a ceremonial cemetery – as well as a behemoth preservation project of a destroyed area.

Moving away from Kobane’s chaotic and lively streets, the shouts of street vendors and the constant buzz of fuel oil generators gradually fade away.

The scale of destruction is biblical – entire multi-storey apartment blocks pancaked and collapsed into piles of concrete with wrecked metal studs spiking out of the heaps. In between the building carcasses, cars used by suicide bombers are twisted into the strangest metal ornaments. Posters of killed fighters cover makeshift billboards and blown-apart walls.

Rohat – an officer in Rojava’s armed forces, the YPG – shouts out from his car. “Want a tour?” he asks in broken English. Since the preservation project is under the military’s thumb, Rohat is also the director of the so-called museum.

We walk slowly across a street dotted with craters and pieces of bricks. There might still be unexploded ordnance, but laughing children play among the ruins regardless. Although people from this neighbourhood-turned-museum were given plots of land in another part of Kobane, many remain living here for lack of financial means to build new homes.
“It’s a slow process” for the museum to take shape, says Rohat. “Big [construction] machines are not available, they’re all on the frontline,” he adds. The area carries heavy emotional load and preserving it as a museum may help locals deal with PTSD. Like many people in Kobane, Rohat tears up when speaking about the massacre of June 2015.

“All the bodies bloated from the heat in every street, I will never forget [it],” says Rohat. “Fighting in Kobane is not a problem, it’s war. But civilians,” Rohat shakes his head. “[The museum] is for the memory of the Kurdish people, like Stalingrad.”

The Kurds sought to immortalise the victory over ISIS that staved off a very likely genocide. Similarly, German and British planners faced a similar question during the post-World War Two reconstruction – namely, what to do with the traumatic history. Some cities chose to rebuild destroyed areas in exact replicas, what some called ‘Disneyfication’, while others decided to preserve elements of the destruction to embed the period in collective memory.

Others yet chose to purge the dark chapters in their history by erasing repressive Soviet and Nazi structures, or the destruction left behind by either totalitarian regime, and building a modernist future-looking urban fabric instead.

Critical of the decisions to leave destruction as a showpiece, Bevan quotes journalist Eric Fredericksen, who argues that leaving fragments of architecture towering “above human lives” at the site of the destroyed twin towers in New York may end up in a “flirt with aestheticising murder”. Yet to leave “no physical trace of the devastation would have been to abnegate the trauma,” wrote Robert Bevan in reference to Hiroshima’s reconstruction approach that preserved a destroyed dome at the site of nuclear detonation.

The Kurds approached healing in the same way as many post-war Europeans cities that displayed defiance by preserving bullet-pocked buildings in Warsaw, shells of burnt-out churches across the UK, and immortalising sites of mass terror across the continent.
Yet the Kurds in Kobane did not have to grapple with a built legacy of their oppressors, ISIS, as their onslaught brought outright death rather than a period of totalitarian occupation, ideological construction, and destruction of vernacular urban memory. This came at a high cost to Kobane, which saw attempts of ‘urbicide’ and full-scale destruction.

Having successfully defended their home, intact ideologically if not physically, the Kurds were left free to choose the best way to honour their lionised memory. The option to preserve a destroyed area of Kobane both commemorated the highly traumatic fight against ISIS and displayed defiance in the face of continuing threats from Turkey.

**Healing space**

“It was a genocide,” says Adnan Hassan, who had left Kobane a day before ISIS attacked the city. This saved his life, but not his 11 family members who lived together in this three-storey building. Two of Adnan’s sisters managed to hide in time, but had to spend the night listening to their family members being killed; the two sisters only managed to escape the house at two in the afternoon the following day.

Slowly taking a drag on his cigarette, Hassan remembers the first day back home. “I had to clean my family’s blood,” he says.

A year later, he founded a humble library on the first floor of the building. The space is cold and electricity cuts off every so often, much like across Rojava. My translator’s sister was married to Adnan’s brother – she was also killed in this house.

“They always wanted to have a library at home,” says Hassan. Now, this space became a gathering point for Kobane massacre survivors, who also wrote a book together. The library houses various meetings and is also one of the few places where Kurds can source books to read in their own language. “People come here every day. After seeing all the books and all the things, they remember their own families and cry,” says Adnan.
The building itself, with the library programme inside, became a symbol of mourning, but also a symbol of hope. Therefore, with the limited means at his disposal, Hassan has succeeded to create a space of memory and healing in this small and most often dark space.

“Everything in this home reminds me of my family and all my memories,” says Hassan. “My sisters couldn’t come back, because when they see the house, it reminds them of the killing.”

The change of use inside, the programme, has helped the family both cope with the tragedy and change the symbolic meaning and memories that the house represents. Instead of destroying memory, the family opted to reshape it. Furthermore, the building acts as a physical monument for the future – “It’s so important for the community, because when they read [the books there], they will learn [about] everything [that happened],” says Hassan.

When electricity briefly returns, Hassan switches on the light. Out from the dark, various family objects come into light, like a school bag that belonged to Adnan’s sister, Rudi, who studied in Istanbul. Next to it, university notes from of another sister, Gulistan. “All the things were important to her,” says Hassan.

“With this library [that they always wanted], I feel like I made the wish of my brother and his wife come true,” adds Hassan. “This way, they will always remain alive. This library gives me strength and the will to live.”

The House of Martyrs
One of the organisations to rise from the underground is the House of Martyrs, which serves the dual function of providing social support to the families of those killed in the fighting and constructing a physical manifestation of memory.

The interior courtyard is wreathed with flowerpots and outside, a humble garden hosts families engaging in conversations. Deeper inside one of the corridors, a sports hall-sized space is covered with pictures of the so-called martyrs, those who died for the revolution and in the years of conflict in northern Syria.

This design, whether built to facilitate healing or simply provide a respite from the chaotic streets outside, mirrors the approach already defined in the US by the Department of Veterans Affairs. In 2018, it approved “its first-ever set of Healing Environment Design Guidelines” for its facilities across the US, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel newspaper. Based on the guidelines, a healing space should “integrate splashing water and plants and spill outside into the grounds with paths, trees, birds and gardens,” similarly to the way the House of Martyrs is laid out.
A physical embodiment of memory, the martyrs’ centre is carefully guarded from the outside, as the building would make a symbolic target for terror attacks by ISIS which have picked up again in the region following the Turkish invasion in October 2019.

Aref Bali, the head of the establishment, sits down for a talk in yet another room covered with pictures of the deceased. “[The centre] operated in secret since 2007,” he says, as “at that time some political prisoners were killed by the [Assad] regime, and it was important for families to have this centre”.

The institution “was established properly in 2012”, after the revolution, because “there were daily fights, martyrs and ceremonies at that time”. Rojava’s communes served another function by each providing “two to four members to do routine visits of the martyrs’ families,” says Bali.
Now, in parallel with the changes taking place across Rojava’s governing structures, “the board for families of martyrs was formed [like a ministry]” at the top level, according to Bali. As the number of the dead increased, the Martyrs’ Centre built a cemetery on the outskirts of Kobane with a large ceremonial parade ground. The cemetery thus became “a symbol of struggle,” says Bali, where the killed fighters are buried with full military honours. Kobane’s “struggle is evidenced by the graveyard,” he says, adding that the cemetery is aimed at the future generations.

Destruction of water towers
Besides preserving or erasing memory, the built environment in Rojava did become part of genocidal displacement as well as a global PR battle – ISIS would destroy water towers in desert areas, which forced some of the local inhabitants to follow the militants. This helped build the opinion among many local Kurds that the predominantly Arab Muslim population which followed ISIS did so out of solidarity and support for the armed group.

Homa Umigdal, the Jewish ‘wall and tower’ settlements, were established by several kibutzen in 1936 in Palestine to project Jewish presence throughout the country. Sharon Rotbard wrote in A Civilian Occupation that the simple structure reflected Israeli push for “fortification and observation”. Similarly to the Homa Umigdal, Syria’s water towers, with a cluster of houses underneath, signified life and expansion.

Meanwhile water towers wrecked into piles of concrete symbolised displacement, as people would desert villages with the tower gone. Their destruction – out of military necessity or as part of the scorched earth policy of the retreating ISIS – therefore worked to devoid the community of life with a single act of destruction, without the need to physically eviscerate the community.

In Syria, if we consider the settlements dotting the barren landscape as attempts to colonise the inhospitable, the water towers stand above the houses with the same imposing symbolism of life and presence as the Homa Umigdal. The symbolic value could therefore be enough to elevate these simple utilitarian objects into the realm of architecture due to their significance in society-building.

With the onset of the war, the structures – some built with the architectural function to beautify as well as serve its fundamental life-giving role – became objects of fortification and observation, used as sniper and reconnaissances posts. Many due to its military significance, other were blown up by ISIS.
In Postmortem City, Stephen Graham writes that everyday infrastructure “may be easily assaulted and turned into agents either of instantaneous terror or debilitating demodernisation”.

However, evidence gathered by journalists suggests that the destruction of water towers, despite making living conditions harrowing, did not lead to a complete loss of life. Mahmoud, an Arab eyewitness interviewed by Chris Huby, a photojournalist working for Le Pictorium, recalled that ISIS “came especially to destroy the water tower”. Mahmoud claimed the village was never occupied by the Islamists who destroyed the water tower “in order to thirst villages and to push inhabitants to not resettle [in the same area]”.

It’s unclear whether ISIS destroyed infrastructure to force villagers to flee and inflict largely purposeless terror, or to make the local Arab population retreat together with them. This, in turn, would have supplied more recruits and propaganda material for the armed group which claimed that the Sunni Arabs were its loyal allies. This would in turn reinforce the alleged mutual mistrust between Kurds and Sunni Arabs that both sides were keen to avert.

In other cases recorded by Luke Mogelson in 2017 for the New Yorker magazine, “hundreds of villagers” retreated with ISIS to its de facto capital, Raqqa, once the Kurdish-led forces captured the largely Sunni Arab town, Karama. Mogelson recorded a striking detail – in the village centre, a concrete water tower laid on its side after being sabotaged by ISIS. As to why the villagers fled with the militants, the locals gave varying accounts not directly linked to the destruction of built environment.

The tower, it seemed, had no impact on the mostly young men who retreated with ISIS to continue the fight, as their decision was purely ideological – “some were forced to go; some had been recruited as militants and went willingly,” wrote Mogelson. Still, the image of a sabotaged symbol of life did much to signify the legacy of ISIS, which ended up dividing the local community when half of the men joined the SDF to fight the Islamists, while the other half retreated to Raqqa.
Others do, however, name water tower destruction as “a political weapon”. Matthieu Delmas wrote in the Middle East Eye in 2017 that ISIS had “systematically destroyed” water towers and other infrastructure “throughout remote villages”. This was done, he argued, to make it “difficult for the inhabitants to return”. The scorched-earth policy by ISIS is documented in UN reports.

In other conflicts, the same tactic has been used by other non-state actors. According to Stephen Graham, who in Cities under Siege quotes John Robb, “insurgent groups in Iraq [...] cut supplies of power and oil in Baghdad [to] undermine the legitimacy of the US-appointed government”. In northern Syria, similarly, historic animosities stoked in part by Assad’s Arab settlement programmes in Kurdish areas were keenly exploited by ISIS as well as the Assad regime and Turkey to undermine the Kurdish-led rule. Local testimonies recall Sunni Arabs, force-fed propaganda and information, fearing the approach of Kurds and some fleeing with ISIS. “Given the repeated failure of terrorist bombings of [...] infrastructure, only its propaganda virtues remain,” wrote Bevan.

Drawing examples from further afield, two workers were injured in spring 2019 while trying to repair damaged power lines in Zolote village on the frontline of eastern Ukraine, where competing narratives form a hidden frontline between the Ukrainian society and those who still harbour separatist dreams. By keeping residents off the grid, Russian propaganda can capitalise on the sentiment of alleged failure of the Ukrainian state.

Yet it wasn’t only ISIS that allegedly used the destruction of built environment as a [1] punishment tool. Amnesty International reported in 2015 that the Kurds in Syria had deliberately displaced “thousands of civilians” and “razed entire villages [...] often in retaliation for residents’ perceived sympathies with, or ties to, members of [ISIS] or other armed groups”.

In an accompanying video report, Amnesty International researchers profiled mostly Arab villages that were allegedly razed by Kurdish-led forces. If true, these tactics mirror the punitive demolition of homes by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or in other conflict zones around the world discussed in detail by Robert Bevan in Destruction of Memory. As in Palestine, the Kurds’ justification for the destruction of homes, according to Amnesty International, was a need for a security zone.

However, a report published by the UN’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria in March 2017 dismissed these allegations.

“The Commission found no evidence to substantiate claims that YPG or SDF forces ever targeted Arab communities on the basis of ethnicity, nor that YPG cantonal authorities systematically sought to change the demographic composition of territories under their control through the commission of violations directed against any particular ethnic group,” according to a Kurdish news agency, Rudaw, which quotes the UN report.
Between aspiration, ideology and corruption

Most of Kobane was completely destroyed during the long war with ISIS. Looking beyond the constant threat of Turkish aggression, Rojava’s authorities embarked on new construction projects in the now expanding city.

The current growth of Kobane stands in stark contrast to the time of stagnation under Assad, when construction in the region was limited to two-storey buildings, holding back economic growth and aspirations of the Kurds. Now, entire multi-storey apartment blocks are rising from destroyed streets, while the municipality is planning to build a new, centrally-planned area— a scale not seen before in Kobane.

“There was a lot of racial discrimination against the Kurds [under the Assad regime],” says Kobane Municipality Co-chair Ocelan Isso. “We have video [evidence] after we captured the municipality [from Assad], showing the regime didn’t intend to [look after] the city.”

The regime spent its budget serving mostly Arab cities, says Isso. “There was huge negligence, because more than 480 villages belonged to the municipality,” he adds.
Shavin Mahmut, Isso’s colleague in the municipality, remembers how, after the official victory over ISIS in Kobane in 2015, people arranged a press conference in one of the central squares with activists, fighters and politicians. The open square became once again a space for “spontaneous eruption”, to use David Harvey’s phrase in Rebel Cities, like at the start of the revolution. Surrounded by shattered streets, the open square symbolised the rallying point of the revolution. The crowd called out to the Kurdish diaspora and the international community for help in rebuilding the city.

“That coming together [of people] is symbolised by Lefebvre in the quest for centrality,” wrote Harvey. “There is an impulse towards and longing [to] restore [the centrality of the city] which arises again and again to produce far-reaching political effects, as we have recently seen in the central squares of Cairo. [...] How else and where else can we come together to articulate our collective cries and demands?”
New area in Kobane

When implementing the large memorial project in the destroyed area, the municipality gave the displaced people plots of land just south of central Kobane in a new, centrally-planned development, which also sought to attract investors and residents from across Rojava.

The process began in 2015, according to Mahmut and two other members of the steering committee, Mahmoud, a surveyor, and Serbas, a civil engineer.

The reconstruction committee was founded on January 29, 2015, by 30 people, but later expanded to include more members. “The function of the [committee] was to clear the city, open roads, and find equipment to help people,” says Mahmut. After the defeat of ISIS in Kobane, “people came back eager to help,” she adds. The committee then split into 14 teams to profile 14 neighbourhoods in order to assess the damage.

After completing the survey, Kurds held a conference in Dyarbakir, southern Turkey, one of the regional Kurdish cities. During the event, they called for the international community’s help, but, in the end, didn’t receive any material support, according to Mahmut. All the heavy machinery had to be brought from Kurdish Turkey, she adds.

Rojava found a state-funded construction agency to provide heavy machinery and raw materials to residents at subsidised prices. “It was a motivation for people to come back,” says Mahmut.

Once the dust had settled, new priorities for the area began to take shape. “The two[1] guiding principles for the new neighbourhood were for it to be open and healthy, and protected,” says Mahmut. The committee members say there was no ideology behind the plans.
“There were no attempts to add anything ideological [...] we consider this new neighbourhood [to be] part of Kobane, and there already are some public squares in the city,” says Mahmut. According to her, the political programme found expression in the built fabric of the city. Embedding democratic spaces in residential construction projects, therefore, isn’t necessary.

Clusters of destruction in Kobane. Source: Digital Globe/UNITAR-UNOSAT/BBC
The clearest expression of Rojava’s politics, meanwhile, was tearing apart the restrictive planning policies of the Assad era.

“In the old areas [of Kobane] there were narrow, old-fashioned streets and neighbourhoods,” says Ocelan Isso, Co-chair of Kobane Municipality. “The streets in the new neighbourhood will be 16 to 24 metres wide, and there will also be a lot of public utilities – gardens, parks, hospitals and medical centres, schools and a garage.” All designed by “specialist engineers in Kobane”.

“Kobane depended on one park,” adds Mahmut. “In this new neighbourhood, [we] added a lot of parks and gardens and wide streets, and a lot of space for public utilities.”

The design process was mostly handled by local government engineers and architects, with the private sector commissioned on a case-by-case basis. To coordinate the reconstruction process, a Rojava-wide committee holds monthly meetings addressing common problems, according to Isso.
Municipality representatives show a CAD map of the new area in Kobane.

The role of these committees was to come up with a functioning planning system for people to follow. Some of the agreed rules already include best practices from abroad, including the 80-20 build-up ratio that should ensure enough open space on individual plots.

“The committee of engineers didn’t suddenly put together the plan of the neighbourhood; they have studied previous projects in Europe, Turkey and the region,” says Isso.

Along the lines of Rojava’s governing structure, “each municipality coordinates with the council of the town” which incorporates committees on ecology, water, beautification, and other aspects, according to Isso. The same committees are found on all levels of the self-administration, down to the commune. This, in theory, should ensure that ideas are channeled from the grassroots up to the city council and further to the municipality and its reconstruction committee.

One of the people allocated a plot of land in the new area is Mustafa Shamhamad who had two shops in the razed neighbourhood. “When I came back, I wanted to rebuild, but the ‘comrades' refused, as the area was to become a museum,” he says, standing in an open field with a zoning plan in his hands, trying to determine where his plot of land is.
The destroyed shops were more conveniently located, he says, but “the future is better” in the new area. However, Shamhamad says he lacks money and so has two choices: “either I keep the land [vacant] for a long time, or I find a developer.”

Despite the revolutionary ambition to reshape the economic landscape of the area, Rojava remains embedded in the usual vectors of global economy. Put under a partial economic blockade, the revolution is yet to escape the need for private capital and investment. One of the common models of development for the plot owners is finding an investor to build a multi-storey apartment block on their land and take one or several floors for themselves.

The authorities had to take into consideration people’s wishes and financial situation, according to the committee. They could do no more than design the building standards and shape of the whole neighbourhood, and the committee couldn’t commit to full ecological measures, “as people had to build quickly – they suffered a lot,” says Mahmut.

**Defence needs**
There is a clear contradiction between designing for a peaceful future and addressing an omnipresent need in Rojava for defence. Building open spaces and wide streets improves citizens’ lives, but it also makes defence against a state actor more difficult. The contradiction is difficult to reconcile.

The 19-century Hausmannian reconstruction of Paris enshrined wide and straight streets to favour the ruling power – by allowing firing lines and movement channels for imperial armies, the French autocracy hoped to put down urban, commune-led insurrections that had hit the country in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Meanwhile, medieval city layouts, or the dense urban mazes of cities in Syria and the region, have historically favoured lightly armed and mostly insurgent-type militaries like the Kurdish guerilla fighters.

Yet in Rojava, the understanding of future needs reverses the Hausmannian thinking and is more in line with the modernist planning principles of post-war Europe. According to the Kurds, wide streets and open spaces are needed to break with the narrow and cramped environment associated with the economic conditions imposed by the Assad regime. “If we rebuild the same city, we are not different from [Assad] regime,” says Mahmut. “We should be unique and different from [Assad] by building an ecological neighbourhood and city.”

The battle for Rojava’s Ras al-Ayn/Sere Kaniye in October 2019 demonstrated just how long the Kurdish-led SDF were able to hold out against an armoured opponent with air and artillery support. Turkish-backed Syrian forces, along with regular Turkish troops, were only able to dislodge the SDF from the tightly-built town after using what many sources, including Amnesty International, say were phosphorus munitions and large-scale indiscriminate bombing.

“Our people have been at war for seven or eight years,” says Mahmoud from the reconstruction committee at Kobane Municipality. “If we tell them our cities should be narrow and tight, it will negatively affect the psychology of the people.”
“Instead of telling them we are preparing for war, we are telling them we are building a new neighbourhood that will be healthy for your future and the future of your children,” he adds.

By November 2018, authorities in Rojava issued new planning laws that stipulated a multi-tiered protection requirement when constructing new dwellings. At the minimum, every new building should include a basement, and if possible, a reinforced staircase, a small or a large basement that could also be used by several dwellings, or a shelter located anywhere on the plot of land.

Ismat Sheikh Hasan is responsible for defence at the regional Executive Council, the de facto regional defence ministry. He says the authorities have learned from the fight against ISIS. “At that time, we received a lot of mortar, sniper fire [and shelling], and we didn’t have many shelters,” he says. “Because our country is not [at peace] yet, and there are threats against us everyday, we decided to build in a protective way.”

The level of protection also depends on the resources available, according to Hasan. “For example, [wealthy people] instead of building in brick, they are using stone [and] are making the walls wider” after seeing “DShK [high-caliber] bullets penetrating bricks”. He adds that vehicle suicide attacks also had a significant impact on brick houses, but not on stone walls.

“It is expensive, but not as expensive as the soul. We saw with our eyes how mortars or handicapped our people, sometimes a whole family sheltered in a home, and after being hit by one mortar most of them were lost,” he says.

Therefore, “the co-presidency of the [Syrian Democratic Council] and the [local] municipalities came together and decided that every building should have a protected point,” says Hasan. The measures are dictated by administrative bodies, he says, and there is no push “by YPG or [military] authorities to build something special” for the civilians.
Hasan admits that despite the lessons learned, people now have different priorities. “People want their future to be good and comfortable,” he says. “We hope we will not see threats and attacks in the future, and that’s why people want to beautify their lives.”

Yet, many locals were skeptical of the mandatory protection, says Shavin Mahmut from the municipality. “They say if Turkey attacks, these things are useless against modern weapons, and to construct all of this is very expensive.”

If analysed through the utopian commune-led principles, there is very little ideological underpinning in Rojava’s reconstruction. Two local architects see missed opportunities, and complain of a highly politicised process in constructing the new outlook of Rojava. Basri Barkal is an architect based in Kobane who mostly works on private projects, refurbishments and various residential projects. He witnessed first-hand how the design priorities changed after the revolution.

The main difference is the use of more cement and steel to build higher “to sell more apartments,” says Barkal inside his office in central Kobane. Additional subtle changes to individual households were brought upon by the focus on women’s rights. “Nowadays women have their own rights, so there’s no need for her to be hidden in the kitchen or any other room,” he says. “If she is visible to others, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

However, it isn’t exactly due to post-revolution societal shifts. “Now most people want to build in American or European way” that includes open-plan kitchens, says Barkal, “but that’s more down to trends, rather than women’s liberation”.

As for the ideological process, Barkal nods: “It would have been nice to have debate spaces for the communes, but no one rasied this issue then, nor now.”

He says that no one proposed spatial ideas that would reflect the direct-democracy conditions, which could be better understood in terms of localised forums. “These
[communal] places are very necessary for the people, but no one discussed this to my knowledge [...] communes had no role in creating or pushing for such places,” he says.

According to Barkal, “if we had forums, it would be better for us now [as] there would be debates between people”. He is adamant about the reasons why the process was, according to him, shut off from public involvement – “We offered experience, but no one listened to us”.

Barkal goes on to list the issues that were unaddressed: the scale of the museum area has decreased, the 80-20 percent build-up rules are circumvented, allotments for parks are ignored, the road layouts are decided arbitrarily, and the quality of construction is poor.

“Of course the communes and the People’s Houses could have benefited from our role,” says Barkal. “They should take the opinions of professionals, but now a single engineer [from the municipality] plays the role of all engineers.”

However, without knowing the Barkal’s background, it’s difficult to judge the reasons behind his scepticism and how objective his criticism is of the authorities, which he says didn’t take opinions of professionals. “They are the ‘military’, and we’re only civilians,” he adds, pointing at the politicised process that bars outsiders.

A testament to the alleged corruption, a cluster of white, newly-built residential buildings stand empty on the edge of the new area that is currently under planning. Local Kurds can recall hearsay about the apartments being intended for the families of martyrs or maybe government or party officials, but no one seems to know who will be the actual beneficiaries. Although the municipality is responsible for the development, Shavin Mahmut and other representatives only shrug: we don’t know who the buildings are for, they say.

Commenting on the allegedly top-down process, Mahmut shares the sentiment of TEV DEM and virtually all self-administration representatives: “There are now many uneducated people in the communes, therefore we have to take decisions at the municipality, although it should be done by the communes and their committees.”

There were many people, she says, who were ready to work towards advancing the revolution, led by Kurdish patriotism and the idea of a free Rojava. Many of them were killed during the war with ISIS or had to flee. “Now people only think about safety and stability, and that’s why they don’t look into the future; only threats and attacks surround them,” says Mahmut.

**Constructing a political capital**
Perhaps more important than the construction of new residential neighbourhoods, or preserving destroyed ones as museums, is the behemoth undertaking in Ain Issa, some 85 kilometres from Kobane. There, architecture and urbanism have a direct role in state-building, no matter how detached it is from the initial grassroot and decentralised society Rojava had envisioned.

Located in the geographical heart of Rojava, the town aspired to house the new government institutions of the Syrian Democratic Council.

Before, when Rojava was only made up of three cantons in Afrin, Kobane and Jazira, the decentralised model was efficient enough, according to Berivan Hassan, the co-chair of the Labour Ministry at the Syrian Democratic Council based in Ain Issa. “But now there is an urgent need to coordinate with one another.”

The plan is to house the so-called ministries and the all-Rojava parliament, the General Assembly, in a single compound in Ain Issa. “We are preparing for the new buildings to house each ministry [and are currently] discussing their [layout],” including the General Assembly building with “a big main hall and sub-offices,” according to Hassan,

At first glance, Ain Issa is a far cry from a future capital city. Surrounded by a vast landscape, the town comes into view just as one passes a large refugee camp. Ain Issa borders fertile plains to the north and a desert that makes up most of Northeastern Syria to the south. Besides small commercial shops that make up the economic heart of towns in the region, there are several compounds that house different branches of SDC governing structures and its security apparatus.

Further afield, a lone four-storey building comes into view with fuel oil smoke billowing above. Surrounded by vast empty stretches, it is the foundation stone – or the first building block – of the capital city envisioned by the Kurdish-led government.
A team from the Ministry of Local Administration and Municipalities, consisting of two co-chairs, Medya Bozan and Joseph Lahdo, and an architect, Mohammed Jalad, are tasked with coming up with the initial framework.

“The buildings should reflect our culture and civilization, especially on the exterior,” says Jalad. “We have no choice but to divide the building into smaller parts [using] European precedents.”

The compound will be divided into offices and an auditorium based on requirements to be set at a later stage. There will also be various recreational and public buildings, according to Jalad. However, it’s difficult to envision who will use the public facilities. A town of only 7,000 residents before the war, it now also houses thousands of refugees, including some ISIS militants and their families separated in a protected compound.

From conversation with the ministry representatives, it is clear that the plan for a government campus is progressing slowly, due to the uncertain outcomes of the conflict. The worries did materialise just a year later, when the frontline between the Kurds and the Turkish-backed forces snaked just a few kilometres from Ain Issa. The refugee camp and the outskirts of Ain Issa were hit by shelling during the fighting.

If Rojava’s authorities continue the theoretical framework of their future capital – its future now in jeopardy due to the Turkish invasion – they risk repeating the mistakes of Western countries when creating representational space. Detached from population centres, the ministerial compound will likely set political space apart from grassroot space, the Commune. In the words of Lefebvre, “we know that the most important decisions are made elsewhere,” which “creates a sense of disappointment in urban reality”.

It may still be possible to achieve democratic space through transgressive boundaries and the relation between political space and the surrounding urban fabric, as profiled by Catherine Cooks in Architecture and Revolution. An attempt to create democratic space through form in the early stages of the Soviet revolution, a Mossoviet auditorium enabled citizens to participate in decision-making by creating accommodation adjacent to a forum, separated by a set of steel blinds. In this way, the grassroot elements in society were “able to participate [...] without actually leaving their own accommodation”.

But in light of Ain Issa’s isolation from the population, a governmental compound is likely to simply distance decision makers from the populace, a physical image of centralised power. Using best practices from European and regional precedents also indicates a careful attempt to construct a national identity, rather than embarking on a radical new approach that Rojava’s early revolution ideals proclaimed – a break from nation-state and capitalism.

In November 2018, the committee dealing with the construction process “still had no teams,” but were at least able to designate land for the government campus, according to Jalad. The process was supervised by the planning office in the ministry, which responded to a request issued on October 4, 2018, by the Euphrates Confederation of Northeastern Syria, the administrative region part of SDC that incorporates Kobane and Ain Issa.

The early tasks set by the committee are to define the needs of each ministry, assembly and council to be based in Ain Issa, after which “we may call for engineers to make plans and designs for a government city,” says Jalad. However, he later claimed that the ministry responsible for the project had a team of engineers, while Ain Issa Municipality was responsible for coming up with the design. The unclear division of responsibilities may reflect the early nature of the project, but also the overlap and confusion between the many layers of the self-administration in Rojava.
Jalad and his colleagues are careful not to make predictions about what the buildings will look like. However, the guiding principle is “culture and civilization, as Öcalan’s [vision] was a democratic nation made up of all the people here,” says Jalad. “Before the revolution, there was only the Arab culture [in the region].”

The second principle is “to achieve the [key] functions needed for our jobs,” adds the co-chair of the ministry, Joseph Lahdo. “For example, we are a local administration in need of a big hall – so we need to make a new hall.”

Whether Rojava should do more to accomplish its ideological principles, Lahdo suggests looking back at history. “After the French revolution, a lot of people were killed and beheaded, and they could not achieve the theory of the revolution. Only decades later [did] they managed to achieve some of it,” says Lahdo. “Compared to other revolutions, we immediately began to [implement the] theory; not all of it, but most of it.”

“And you can see it on the ground, except in [the built environment], because [Rojava] needs stabilisation and security,” he adds. Lahdo’s co-chair, Medya Bozan, continues: “Even though there is no apparent security and stabilisation, we have established councils and committees.”

“We have achieved theory [because] all the ethnicities are now living together,” adds Bozan. “We are not a government for Syria, we are a self-administration for Northeastern Syria. The achievement [of self-administration gives] strength to the communes and the councils.”
So in many ways the communes shifted and changed together with the rest of Rojava’s self-governing structures, without this being a demise. Bodies such as the Society Self-Defence Forces or the martyrs’ centre were no longer fully dependent on the fragmented communes, despite their direct-democracy appeals, but found representation in both space and politics in the higher levels of integrated governance.

“The aim of the self-administration of Northeastern Syria [the SDC] is to coordinate” between the upper tiers of government and grassroot bodies, says Lahdo. “We have said in the theory that our administration should be democratic,” says Lahdo, adding that this in itself makes the presence of commune a success, regardless of its embodiment in physical space.
In October 2019, the Kurds lost their only security guarantor when US President Donald Trump ordered American forces out of Syria. Days later, on October 9, 2019, Turkey and its so-called Syrian National Army entered Rojava.

While the US forces were rushing to the Iraqi border, their abandoned bases were taken over by Russian and Assad’s troops, with whom the SDF had to hastily reach an agreement. A historical geopolitical shift in the Middle East began in Rojava.

“If we will have to choose between compromise and genocide, we will choose our people,” the chief of SDF Mazloum Abdi wrote in Foreign Policy magazine. Rojava had to choose between two dreadful alternatives in the fight against Turkey – to maintain autonomy and fight alone against one of the biggest NATO states, or to return ‘to the arms’ of Assad following his earlier calls to do so.

Footage on Syrian state-controlled TV and on social media couldn’t be more different. National channels broadcasted potentially staged scenes of local Kurds greeting the Assad forces with the ceremonial throwing of rice, while images circulated elsewhere showed locals swearing and throwing shoes at the cattle trucks carrying Syrian regime soldiers to the frontline with Turkey.

Meanwhile Turkish-backed forces staged a roadside execution of Havrin Khalaf, the co-chair of Future of Syria Party, and Amnesty International claimed there was mounting evidence of Turkey and its Syrian forces committing war crimes. US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper also said that Ankara could be held accountable for possible war crimes.

As the events in northern Syria escalated, Russia began patrolling the border alongside Turkish troops[2] in October 2019, following an agreement between Moscow and Ankara. Most of the roads in Rojava are now controlled by Assad’s forces, which replaced the yellow SDC flags above checkpoints and barracks with Assad’s red, white and black, despised by many.

According to the agreement reached between the Kurds and Assad, the SDF will be incorporated into Syria’s military structures, while at least for now Assad is promising Syrian
Kurds some autonomy, including letting SDC control the Samelka border crossing with Iraqi Kurdistan.

However, Assad had promised amnesty to rebels in other Syrian regions, but they later still faced repressions. The regime forces, though, have never clashed with the Kurds in northern Syria.

The frontline stabilised in January 2020, with the Turkish-backed forces having seized large swathes of land along the border. Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn/Sere Kaniye, the few Kurdish urban centres in northern Syria, as well as dozens of villages, remain in Turkish hands. Living in fear, “people drive from Kobane to the countryside at night” to avoid being caught in shelling, messages from people I met in 2018 flash on WhatsApp.

“Self-administration is a Kurdish project, there are many [forces] against it, but if we see an attempt to rule from the top, we will resist,” Shaheen Alali said in 2018. “Communes are the seeds of democracy, they will remain.”

It’s an open question whether Alali would have said the same words exactly a year later.
The project does not aim to be a comprehensive account of the revolution, and many of the key contextual factors – such as the PKK and other 20th century Kurdish movements – are barely touched upon. The crucial women’s rights movement and other socioeconomic accomplishments in Rojava, such as the incorporation of ethnic minorities into the decision-making apparatus, as well as economic and educational advances, also deserve to be explored in more detail.

Since 2015, I’ve been reading and collecting material on Rojava’s revolution from mostly secondary sources. Since 2018, I’ve held interviews with Kurdish diaspora representatives in Europe, including, but not limited to, PYD and the Kurdish National Council representatives in Brussels.

The research trip in Rojava lasted from October 26 to November 22, 2018, and was partly funded by a research grant from the Stockholm Royal Institute of Art. I was dependent on translators, although, I chose them based on recommendations from other colleagues in an attempt to find impartial people.
Kobane was chosen as the main point of investigation due to its symbolic role in the fight against ISIS and its importance in the opening stages of the revolution. However, the situation varies dramatically across the SDC, especially in the Arab-dominated provinces. During the course of the investigation, I spoke to more than 40 activists and representatives from all tiers of self-administration, as well as the military. Many more local people were also kind enough to share their stories, opinions and experiences with me.

Due to the aforementioned limitations, this work does not intend to be an in-depth look at the Rojava revolution as a whole, but is merely an attempt to critically examine some aspects of what happened to this ambitious project and its revolutionary communes.