



# Syria: A New Paradigm for Personal and Community Transformation

by Linda Pearcey

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Syria is a land of extremes. It has witnessed invasions and occupations over the ages, from the ancient Egyptians to the Romans, from the Mongols to the Crusaders, and from the Ottomans to the French occupation in the 20th century. It is a country of magnificent Mediterranean beaches, fertile plains, steppes, mountains, and deserts. It is home to diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Christians, Druze, Alawite Shias and Arab Sunni Muslims. The country sits at a vital crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa and historically stood at the center of the world's intellectual and economic trade.

Today, Syria is entering a new stage—it is moving away from a state-controlled economy to one that is social market-led. Its latest national strategy is striving to get the "... Syrian economy and society prepared to meet the demands and requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and an evolving epoch of political and economic international relations." (Syrian Arab Republic State Planning Commission 2006, p. 2). With 65% of its population under the age of 25, Syria realizes that its future success depends on building human capital and augmenting the nation's knowledge base by investing in human resources and intellectual capabilities.

As part of this new shift, Syria's education system is undergoing reform as well. A new national curriculum is in development, striving to shift the traditional authoritarian education model to a participatory, active one. The reform of the educational system has been acknowledged as a key strategic initiative for equipping Syrian youth with the necessary skills to prosper within a knowledge-based society. Taking education out of the classroom and

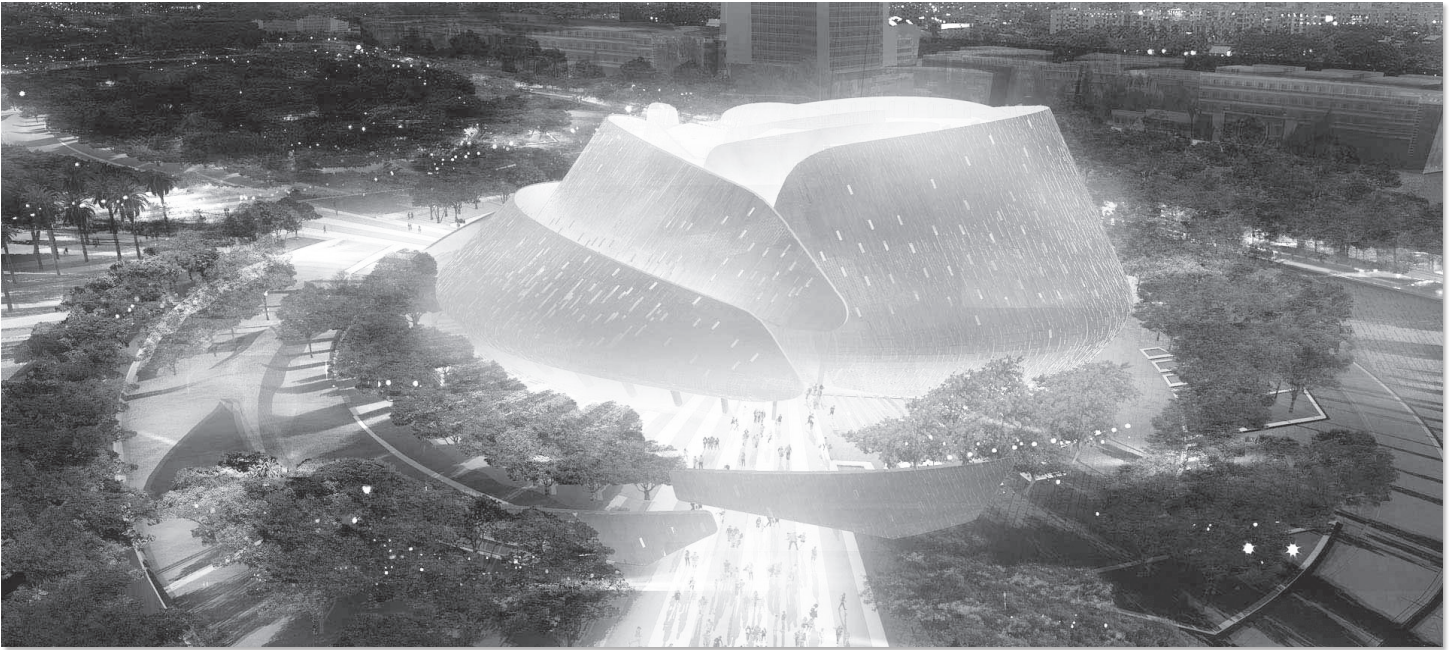
cultivating a new generation of self-motivated life-long learners is a core feature of this reform.

## **A Vision Shaped by the Nation's Need**

As part of these new reforms, the country is investing heavily in its youth. One of these investments is Massar (best translated as *the path*), a complex, large-scale national learning and development project for Syrian young people. In this article I will be discussing both the plans for the overall project as well as the specific physical components of the Massar Discovery Center.

A non-governmental, non-profit project, Massar has an ambitious aim—to reach, inspire and empower over six million young people across the length and breadth of Syria. By creating exciting, interactive environments and challenging activities across the nation, Massar is offering youth the opportunity to explore, experiment, challenge and debate the complex world of today and tomorrow. Massar wants to foster in young people a sense of their own capacity to play a positive role in their world and the world at large.

Massar's mission is to bring within reach of every Syrian child aged 5 to 15, a structured Syrian program of informal yet engaging programs. These are designed to augment the traditional classroom experience by providing new ways of inspiring and enriching minds. The goal is to strengthen the family, the nation, and the contribution of Syrian youth in achieving their potential as individuals and citizens of Syria and the world. Massar's scope is ambitious and is brought to life by three national projects, all in various stages of development.



*The Massar Children's Discovery Center is designed by Henning Larsen Architects (Copenhagen). The form of the building is inspired by the Damascus Rose, cultivated by the ancient Syrians as a symbol of perfection and knowledge. Courtesy of Henning Larsen Architects.*

**National Touring Program:** a range of travelling activities that promotes discovery learning and questioning among children, teens and their families. The program, led by trained young facilitators, has to date served more than 120,000 people across the country. This program started in 2005 and is on-going.

**Regional Discovery Centers:** a series of small regional discovery centers planned for each of the country's fourteen governorates or regions. The first opened in 2007, and a second is planned to open in 2011 with others to follow over the course of the next decade.

**The Massar Discovery Center:** the Center will be the nexus of Massar operations—a 16,000 m<sup>2</sup> state-of-the-art children's discovery center (the first of its kind in Syria). The Center will offer young people and their families a wide range of learning experiences, environments, and activities. Interactive exhibits will focus on five themed galleries (Beginnings, Life, Our World, Ideas, and Achievements) which are designed especially for young Syrian audiences, offering a journey of discovery. Planning for the Discovery Center started in 2006, and the project is currently finalizing the Detailed Design stage. Construction has commenced and the Center is scheduled to open in 2013 in the nation's capital of Damascus. For the purposes

of this article, I will be focusing on my experiences working on the Discovery Center.

#### **Syrian Leadership**

The Massar project is under the leadership of the Syrian Trust for Development and supported by a Syrian Massar team with on-going support from international consultants. The project is an international effort with consultants from Canada, the United Kingdom, Egypt, the Netherlands, and Denmark contributing their own specific experiences and expertise to the talents of the Syrian team to create the project's unique character.

Since the project's inception in 2006, I have served as one of three consultant Interpretive Planners for the Damascene Discovery Center—another Interpretive Planner and I are based in Canada, and the third is based in the United Kingdom. In the development stages, there were four core teams, each including a consultant Interpretive Planner, a Syrian counterpart from Massar, two to three representatives from an international exhibition design team, and one international Graphic Designer. In total, there were four exhibition design teams—three based in the United Kingdom and one based in the Netherlands—supported by international design specialists

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in the areas of multilingual graphics, exhibit lighting, acoustics, audio-visual hardware, structural engineering, and challenged access. Our concept development process began with a collaborative approach with the client team. We identified key constituents and stakeholders involved with the project, and we asked them to participate actively in a collaborative process of consultation to ensure comprehensive input into the early development phase. The Discovery Center's mandate, mission, and goals provided the context against which the content was developed and formed the framework for the discovery learning philosophy of the facility.

Working with Syrian educators, academics, and children's specialists, the core team developed content through a robust process of analysis, research, aggressive brainstorming, and rigorous testing. We then embarked on a reiterative process of content development where all content ideas and concepts were thoroughly and frequently vetted and reviewed. We put great store in project workshops which brought the team together in the spirit of collaboration and partnership and in testing content possibilities against a range of audience profiles and curriculum linkages.

Throughout the development phase, our meeting schedule was intense. On a weekly basis each team (including consultant and Syrian Interpretive Planners and their exhibition design teams) communicated virtually via Skype to discuss and vet content and to decide how best to realize content through design. The consultant Interpretive Planners held weekly virtual meetings to ensure there was no overlap and to ensure consistency in messaging and objectives. Each graphic team (including the Interpretive Planners, an

exhibition team representative and a Graphic Designer) also met virtually once a week to ensure that exhibition graphic development was informed by exhibition design development. Every two weeks, the project's Lead Designer in London met physically with all exhibition design teams to monitor progress. Every six weeks, workshops were held in either Damascus or London for team presentations and client brain-storming sessions, and every twelve weeks, presentations were made to the client for comment, direction, and approvals. Once the client agreed to the content, we fed it into the exhibition planning process where it drove exhibition formats, display methods and techniques, interactivity levels, media range and usage, programming requirements, and staffing requirements.

#### **Interpretive Planning Across the Cultures: The Challenges, Outcomes, and Benefits**

Working with a large-scale national project in a different culture posed a number of interesting challenges for which the other international consultants and I had to seek creative solutions.

#### **Capacity Building**

Massar is a new organization without an established record of delivering successful museum programs in an efficient manner. Although there are many talented and able workers in Syria, most are not trained for contemporary museum work at the technical or professional level. It was imperative to start training for museum programs early and to sustain these programs through the foreseeable future, in order to develop the staff necessary to carry Massar forward. It was also essential for the international consultants to be sensitive to the unique circumstances and values of the Syrian communities in which they were



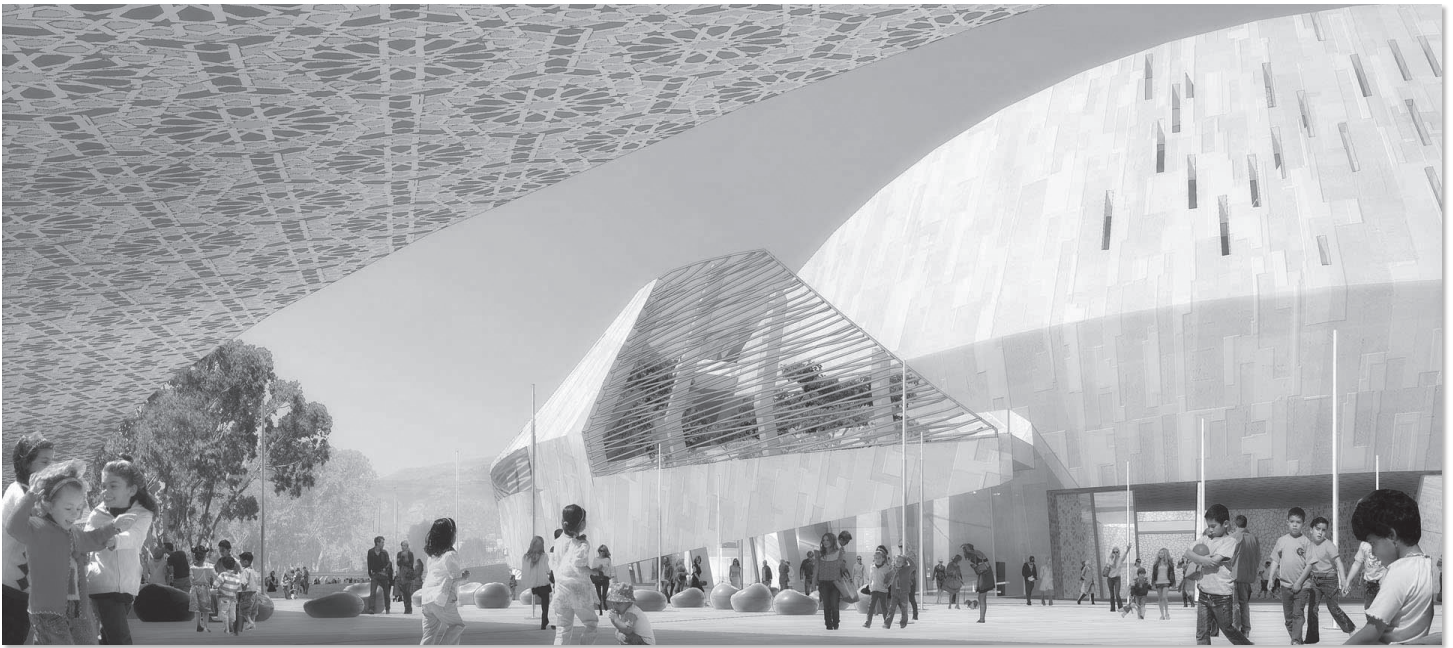
*The core of the Discovery Center forms a large communal orientation space surrounded by a web of ramps interweaving the public plateau with the shell structure. Courtesy of Henning Larsen Architects.*

working. At times solutions taken from the international context were not as effective in the local setting. As an example, in many western children’s museums, insectariums featuring an array of creepy crawlers provide exciting opportunities for visitors to observe and interact with living species. In Syria, however, there is a deep cultural aversion to insects and animals in general because they are perceived to be unclean. After a series of discussions with our Syrian counterparts, we came to an arrangement where “friendly” insects such as crickets and leaf cutter ants were deemed to be acceptable while “dirty” insects such as cockroaches were not.

Also, sometimes the ideas and enthusiasm of local Syrian team members provided new insights for which the consultant team had little understanding. In a society where typically children’s opinions are not valued or heard, the Syrian Massar team proposed a series of participatory experiences allowing visitors to vote on issues relevant to them. The concept of a series of voting exhibits where Syrian

children are asked their opinions is almost viewed as radical for this country; and after much dialogue with our Syrian counterparts, the consultant Interpretive Planners came to understand and appreciate the importance of providing this experience to Syrian children—something we often take for granted in western societies.

Because Massar was envisioned as a project of learning distributed across the nation, the planners believed that a team of in-country trained professionals would be essential. It is the people of Massar who will make the program a success, and building in Syrian capacity has been central in the planning and delivery processes. Throughout the planning, development, and delivery stages of the project, increasing numbers of Syrian colleagues and partners joined the team as it was a mandate to build capacity within Syria. The consultant team has tried to ensure that all museological core and support skills will be represented in Syria by the project’s end. If Massar programs are to be created and delivered by Massar staff,



The Discovery Center's massive 'petals' unfold to create a series of exterior balcony spaces for outdoor exhibits. Courtesy of Henning Larsen Architects.

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the training process will have to be elastic so that it can be expanded as the program's services grow and evolve and as the role of the consultants contracts and diminishes over time.

#### **Mentorship**

As part of the interpretation process, each consultant Interpretive Planner was paired with a Syrian counterpart in a shared mentorship arrangement that involved cultural awareness and perspective exchanges for international museum experience. Experience and knowledge from the consultant team of planners was harnessed whereby new skills were learned by our Syrian counterparts through example and support. In the Schematic Design phase, the consultant Interpretive Planners set up reports that detailed the aims and objectives for each exhibit as well as an overall experience description. Using these reports as templates, the Syrian Interpretive Planners then adapted them to their needs by adding appropriate content unique or particular to Syria itself—content not evident or known to the consultants. This was particularly important for the content developed for a gallery themed on achievements. The gallery's thrust was to highlight achievements from the world's greatest discoveries and inventions through to the importance of personal achievements we all make in our everyday lives. Examples of

these achievements—great and small—focused on Syrian exemplars to illustrate how Syria has made great contributions in the past and in the present. Because of their intimate and first-hand cultural and historical awareness, it was the Syrian Interpretive Planners who took leadership in researching and developing much of the content for this gallery. This ensured that the examples finally chosen did not carry a western perspective and would be recognizable to our young Syrian audiences.

Once the other consultant Interpretive Planners and I had written draft text for all exhibits in English, it was then the responsibility of our Syrian counterparts not to merely translate the text into Arabic but to rewrite it from their own perspective as Syrians, using the English as guideposts. This ensured that the Syrian context of Massar spoke to local audiences in voices that were meaningful to them. At the same time, Syrian architects, engineers, and designers were working as part of their own program teams in Damascus and London, building local capacities but in different areas and skill sets.

Massar is a Syrian project; it was envisioned by Syrians, and that vision has been nurtured, directed, and managed by a team of Syrian professionals. Throughout the development process, the project has involved the best of

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international practice and expertise partnered with Syrian human resources. The aim was to start building special skills and capabilities within Syria. As Massar develops, the project will blossom and will be maintained by an ever-growing Syrian team working without external assistance. Under such an arrangement of mentorships, Massar is positioning itself at the forefront of museological training in the country, if not throughout the entire region. Through its many offerings, the program is steadily building a base of professional workers focused on the needs of Syrian children.

### **Community Building: Pre-Opening**

Early in its thinking, Massar wanted a methodology to engage in continual dialogue with Syrian children as key stakeholders in the exhibit development process.

Pre-opening, the exhibition design process has sought to engage children in the planning and implementing of the Discovery Center to reflect their thoughts, words, and artistic creations. With the establishment of the Massar Club, Massar created a mechanism by which to engage with children and the public at large in a series of weekly programs. Massar staff interacted with children and young people to develop, create, and produce a variety of products ranging from artworks to video, photographs to stories, films to poetry. All suitable products were collected to form a database accessible to all exhibit teams for use in the galleries. These products created by Syrian children will be interwoven into the very fabric of the Discovery Center as all exhibits are constructed in the coming phases. In addition, as part of the planning cycle, Massar has established a series of dedicated Art Programs to allow children and young people

to work with local artists, teachers, and others to create site-specific art installations. These art pieces will, again, be part of the Discovery Center exhibition landscape and fabric.

Massar is also currently operating a Prototype Center to gather public feedback and input as the designs move from concept to fabrication. A Prototype Center has been built on-site to allow children, families, and interested citizens to work directly with Massar to test the exhibit components and programs before construction. This will ensure that all goals and objectives are met and exceeded. As part of the evaluation process, Massar staff is working with the Syrian public to assess exhibit ideas, prototypes, and interpretive components to test all for functionality and the ability to communicate content effectively. Such practices will promote Massar's lifecycle approach to evaluation, ensuring that future exhibit planning builds in continual feedback from visitors and audiences.

Through the Massar Club, Arts Program, and Prototype Center, the process is ensuring that Syrian children are directly engaged and participating in the shaping of the Discovery Center. Within the exhibits and the building's environment, Syrian children will see reflections of themselves through their own creations and products, thereby making the Center their own.

### **Community Building: Post-Opening**

Just as Massar wanted continual dialogue with children stakeholders pre-opening, they have also sought a mechanism to ensure continual dialogue post-opening. Post-opening, the interpretation teams are planning to incorporate multiple opportunities for children to share anonymously their opinions on a

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**Reference:**  
*The 10th five year plan 2006-2010*, Syrian Arab Republic: State Planning Commission, p. 2.

broad range of topics addressed through the Discovery Center. In addition to traditional paper-based feedback mechanisms and on-going interviews with visitors, the interpretation team has introduced digital polling stations located throughout the Center in the Transitional Zones— decompressing spaces between the exhibitions and galleries. In these spaces, visitors will be invited to sit and relax while participating in dialogue. Additionally, visitors will be encouraged to participate in a number of polls.

Massar has the potential to survey the opinions of Syrian youth—for perhaps the first time. Through polling stations, Massar will be able to gather input and opinion data from their visitors, targeting those aged 12 to 15 years of age. This data will assist Massar in developing new programs and exhibits that speak directly to youth on matters with which they are concerned. In a traditional society where young people are still seen but seldom heard, this program will offer great insight into the thinking of the future decision makers of Syria.

By frequently changing the feedback questions, Massar will get a better understanding of

what interests and engages Syrian youth. This cumulative information will be shared with decision-makers in Syria and will help advise Massar on new programs and activities to respond to these issues. This feedback loop will be a critical part of Massar, ensuring that it stays current and in dialogue with the thinking of young people in Syria.

#### **From Vision to New Futures**

Massar is a vision that originated in Syria and was born from a new nation-wide desire to foster and invest in youth as the country's future. Though it uses the best of international practice and expertise, the project is managed by a Syrian team. Throughout its development, the aim has been to build the special skills and capabilities inside Syria that will make it possible to maintain and grow Massar throughout its lifetime without recourse to external assistance. Massar's planners hope that through the pre-and post-opening mechanisms described above, Syria's youth will see their physical expressions and commentary statements reflected in the building's fabric. They will find that their opinions and contributions have been heard, and are shaping the future direction of Massar as it grows to meet the needs of the country and its youth. ✨