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Architect aims to rebuild a church and help restore a quake-hit Turkish city’s multicultural past



Architect Buse Ceren Gul is on a mission: restore a 166-year-old Greek Orthodox church that was long a beacon of her hometown’s multicultural past. She believes restoring the church left mostly in ruins by the earthquakes in southern Turkey three years ago will help locals reconnect to their city.

The magnitude 7.8 earthquake on 6 February 2023, and another hours later were among Turkey’s worst disasters . In Antakya, the quakes destroyed much of the historical town centre.

After years of planning, campaigning and fundraising, Gul’s team recently uncovered St. Paul’s Church from the rubble that reached up to 5 meters (16 feet).

“The old city is central to the earliest memories of anyone who grew up here,” the 34-year-old Gul told The Associated Press, strolling around the church.

“‘Have we vanished?’ I asked myself when I first saw the site in the aftermath of

the quakes," she said.

The quakes destroyed or damaged hundreds of thousands of buildings in Turkey, leaving more than 53,000 people dead. Another 6,000 people were killed in neighbouring Syria.

An estimated 10,000 Christians lived in Hatay province before the earthquake, a tiny part of the overall population but one of the largest Christian concentrations in Turkey outside Istanbul.

Antakya was one of the hardest-hit cities, with the destruction threatening to erase one of its oldest streets, Saray Avenue, a hub for Christians, Muslims and Jews of different sects. The street is home to the Greek Orthodox St Paul's Church, which belongs to an Arabic-speaking community.

The neighbourhood, like others in Antakya, has become "unrecognisable to its residents," said Gul, who belongs to the Alevi Muslim community. "But raising the old city on its feet might prove that Antakya's roots can be preserved once again."

Saving its rich history

Gul was studying and working on the St Paul's Church's renovation since before the earthquakes. Of the 293 cultural heritage sites damaged in the province, the church is among the few that already had approved architectural drawings, which Gul was drafting.

"When I was working on those plans, one of my mentors told me to draw in a way that the church can get rebuilt if it gets demolished," Gul said. "I never thought this grand structure could actually be obliterated, but I drafted a point-by-point plan."

Known as Antioch in the Middle Ages, Antakya is a biblical city dating to the sixth century BCE. Over centuries, its Hellenistic, Roman and Ottoman layers – and its diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic communities – survived at least five earthquakes of magnitude 7.0 or higher since 115 CE, disasters that killed hundreds of thousands of people and leveled much of the city.

St Paul's Church, a part of Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, on the eastern bank of the Orontes River, was completely rebuilt in 1900 after being destroyed by an earthquake in 1872.

After saving the rebuilding plans from the ruins of her office right after the quakes, Gul secured the support of the World Monuments Fund, a nonprofit that works to preserve endangered cultural heritage.

With the fund's technical and financial contributions, Gul's team cleared tons of rubble and set aside the stones they recovered intact. The team continues project planning and technical assessments for the reconstruction stage, but the work on site has stalled until more funding arrives.

"We used to be a financially self-sufficient foundation that was able to help families in need," Fadi Hurigil, president of the Greek Orthodox Church Foundation of Antakya, which oversees the reconstruction project, told AP. "We lost up to 95% of our income after the earthquakes."

The rents from church-owned shops on Saray Avenue that catered to tourists provided the church with its main income. Their reopening will be key to help the congregation start generating income as post-earthquake monetary aid from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch in Damascus and other donors has dwindled, Hurigil said.

Since the beginning of the year, the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change has contracted a company for the redevelopment of the shops.

Challenges of rebuilding after the earthquake

The main challenge for the Antioch Orthodox Christians is the return of people who once filled the St Paul's Church's courtyard and the Saray Avenue district. With most houses in the historical city centre still in ruins, the majority of the city's Greek Orthodox community are displaced from their ancestral homes.

Hurigil said 370 to 400 families lived in central Antakya before the quakes, of whom only about 90 have returned, though others visit the city for commemorative ceremonies.

"The community's biggest need to be able to return to Antakya is the reconstruction of their homes and commercial properties," he said.

Many in the Christian Orthodox Community with damaged or destroyed properties live outside of Antakya in smaller districts of Hatay province or in surrounding cities, in the absence of a wider urban planning for restoration of Antakya's historical centre.

Evlin Huseyinoglu is one of them. She had a family home only a few minutes walk from Saray Avenue that was rebuilt just before the earthquakes.

It had only minor damages in the quake, but the family found it financially risky to restore and settle back in the house in the absence of a decisive urban plan. They are living in Arsuz, a three-hour drive from Antakya, in what used to be their summer house.

Residents and community leaders who lived in the city for generations fear that the extended displacement of different religious and ethnic groups from the city will upend the long-established intercultural harmony that characterized Antakya.

“We grew up in Saray Avenue, now there is no Saray Avenue,” says Dimitri Dogum, 59, a St Paul’s Church official whose family lived in Antakya for the past 400 years. “So many people have left the city already and it could take another five years until Antakya recovers.”

Dogum, who is Christian, fears that his son and the children of his Sunni Muslim friends will not form the sort of friendships and interfaith dialogue he enjoyed when he spent long days of his boyhood playing on the street together.

“People are gone now,” said Dogum. “My fear is that we will lose the culture of living together.”

Source: AP

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