

Existence and the Spatial Memory of Gaza: The Case of Al-Alami Historical House

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Abstract: Gaza, Palestine, has been suffering from war for years. Theories of architectural conservation fall helpless in dealing with dangerous situations in conflict regions. The preservation of Al-Alami house came as a culmination of great efforts and proved how the preservation of architectural heritage is usually in need, more than theoretical arguments, for well and determination that is fed by cultural awareness and dignity. Instead of relying on large-scale conservation plans, Iwan Center for Architectural Heritage at the Islamic University of Gaza (Iwan) relied on the theoretical framework of conservation under sever difficulties: to activate local partnership, community participation, networks of volunteers, minimal gradual conservation, and adaptive reuse. The preservation of Al-Alami house proved that the context and the innovative conservation approach are of great importance. It is true that this will not protect heritage from the devastation of war. But it represents the rescue thread for conflict regions.

Keywords: architecture, culture, conservation, urban, community, partnership, Al-Alami house.

1 Introduction

Conflict zones suffer from long severe challenges that affect every aspect of human life. International conventions on the protection of architectural heritage during wartimes such as the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1972 World Heritage Convention always remain powerless before warfare destruction. The Israeli aggression in Gaza has systematically targeted not only human lives but also the tangible and intangible symbols of Palestinian identity. Despite such devastation, Palestinians have persisted in defending their heritage. The Blue Shield Committee's 2007 statement on threatened cultural property in the Middle East reaffirmed the need to safeguard cultural assets in war zones. [1] Yet, the theories of conservation developed in stable societies fail to address the urgent realities of heritage conservation under war. The author and his team at Iwan, developed a framework integrating cultural awareness, reuse, and community participation into conservation practices. This approach found its most powerful expression in the preservation of the Al-Alami Historical House—an emblem of the Palestinian urban memory in Gaza.

1.1 Historical buildings and urban memory

Historical buildings play a crucial role in preserving urban memory by physically representing the cultural, social, and architectural history of the city. Studies show that such structures embody the aesthetic and functional values of the past. They also help reinforce the sense of place and continuity against rapid urban change. It has been emphasized that historic buildings reflect collective memory and contribute to local identity. They support continuity in urban development. [2] additionally, when communities lose these landmarks, their sense of belonging and their identity suffer. [3]

1.2 The destruction of historical buildings destroys urban memory

The destruction of historical buildings can profoundly undermine urban memory by erasing the physical anchors through which communities are connected to their past. The loss of historic built environments leads to urban amnesia. [4] It leads to the creation of superficial distorted memories that disturb the genuine cultural continuity. [5] More broadly, the removal of social and architectural significance damages the communal identity of people. [6]

1.3 The colonial philosophy of memory destruction

The philosophy of colonial power often viewed architecture as a tool of domination through the deliberate destruction and transformation of existing buildings. This represents a means to erase local identity and assert imperial authority. The colonial powers aim to replace indigenous structures as part of a broader project of cultural assimilation. They legitimize these actions by the concept of civilizing the uncivilized occupied societies. It has been argued that dismantling historic buildings is a form of memorycide: a strategic erasure of a people's memory to destroy resistance and to reshape space in the dimensions of colonialism. [7] Thus, colonial destruction of built heritage is not an accidental byproduct, but a philosophically and politically motivated act

of power intended to disrupt historical continuity and to restructure the collective memory of the indigenous owners of the land. [8]

1.4 Struggle of the occupied for their urban memory

People living under aggressive occupation face profound obstacles in preserving their historical buildings. Occupation means the occupying power enforces control over cultural institutions, heritage sites and urban space. This results in neglect, destruction of local heritage, deforming its identity, and cutting its continuity. [9] The material and institutional capacities for preservation are dramatically weakened through the continuous displacement of residents, damage to infrastructure, lack of funding and institutional breakdown leave historic buildings exposed and undermaintained. [10] The historical buildings are not just artifacts but representations of collective memory, culture, and identity. Their deterioration or destruction thus becomes a way in which the heritage of the occupied community is undermined. [11]

2 Architectural heritage conservation under occupation: theoretical framework

People under occupation usually face serious constraints like restricted sovereignty, limited funding, and lack of institutional support. The direct result of this is the weak or absent formal heritage-preservation programs. It has been noted that prolonged occupation brings the cultural institutions, language, traditions and heritage under control of the occupier. [8] Bottom-up, community-driven strategies provide valuable choices for the local community to preserve its built heritage. Some of the choices include leveraging volunteer activity, employing traditional craftsmanship, and the use of local materials. They also include employing careful documentation and maintenance rather than large-scale restoration. One of the valuable choices is the flexible, adaptive reuse to keep historical buildings in use with relevant functions. These local efforts help maintain urban memory and cultural identity despite resource scarcity and difficult conditions. Many studies show that local communities with awareness, sense of belonging, collaboration and shared responsibility are more resilient and able to take positive actions for the preservation of their architectural heritage. [12] Community-driven heritage theory establishes a strong belief that heritage is not simply an objective set of monuments to be preserved by governments but is socially constructed by communities. It is one of their best ways to reflect their values, history and identity. [13] Despite the aggressive destruction of historical buildings under occupation and its threat to collective memory, it is scientifically evidenced that community participation, capacity-building, and adaptive reuse offer alternative approaches for preservation when governmental and financial support is absent. In the context of territory under occupation, this framework strongly proved how the people of Gaza preserved their historical buildings, with little funding provided by international bodies like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Instead of relying on large-scale external grants, Iwan concentrated on local partnership, community participation, forming networks of stakeholders and volunteers, incremental maintenance, and multifunctional use as their innovative approach for the preservation of historical buildings in Gaza.

3 Al-Alami house

The house is located near the Pasha Palace in the Daraj neighborhood of the Gaza Old Town (GOT), overlooking Al-Wahda Street from the east. It is part of a historic urban fabric composed of several historic buildings that embody part of the GOT's historical identity. This includes the Omari Mosque, the Qaysariyya Market, the Ghussein Cemetery (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Location of Al-Alami house in GOT.

The building has continuously been owned by the Alami family since its construction. The current owner is Mr. Riyadh Al-Alami. The building was built as a residential home for the family, and its function as a residence remained unchanged until it was abandoned in 2003. This was after numerous structural problems arose. Since its construction, the residents have not made any structural additions other than covering the inner courtyard with steel and asbestos shed and repeatedly plastered and painted the house walls.

3.1 Description of the building

The building consists of two floors (Figure 2 and 3). The ground floor is accessed through the entrance below the *sabat* which is a structure (usually a room) built on top of a narrow alley between the buildings. followed by a narrow vestibule, an important element of traditional Palestinian architecture that ensures the privacy of the house. The vestibule leads to the inner courtyard area of which is around 40 m². The courtyard is surrounded by three rooms, an iwan, a kitchen and a bathroom. Two stair flanges lead to the first floor.

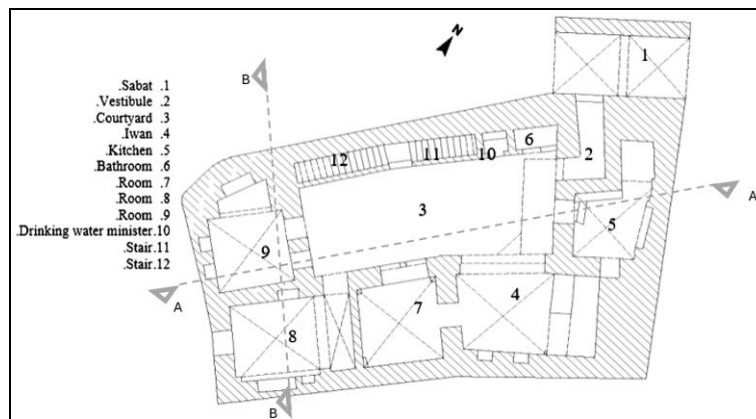


Figure 2: Ground floor plan.

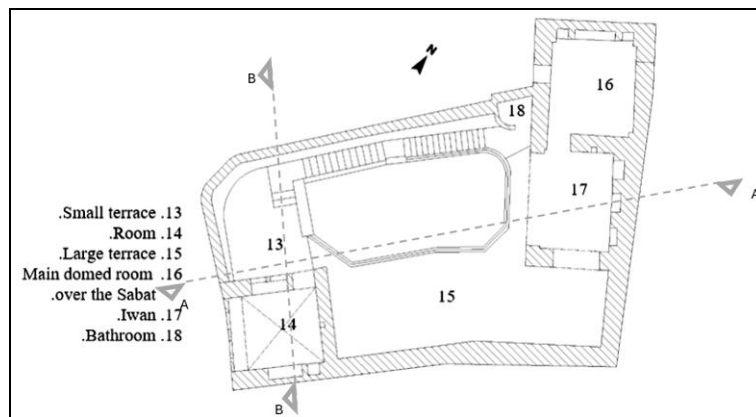


Figure 3: First floor plan.

The first floor has a room above the *Sabat*, covered by a large dome decorated internally with beautiful motifs and opens to an iwan with a large terrace (Figure 4). There is a cross-vaulted room on the south-west corner (Figure 5).



Figure 4: First floor iwan after renovation.



Figure 5: First floor cross vaulted room after renovation, Dr. Abdurrahman Mohamed (middle) and ICRC economic security commissioner, Jerusalem office (right).

The building's external facades consist of solid walls with no openings overlooking the external alleys, except elevated windows in the rooms of the first floor. The internal structures of the house are shown in sections A-A and B-B (Figure 6 and 7).

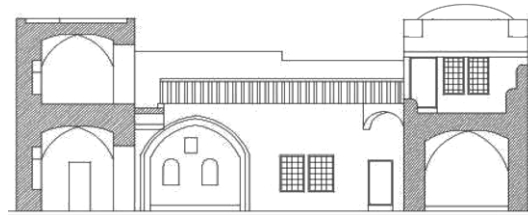


Figure 6: Section A-A.

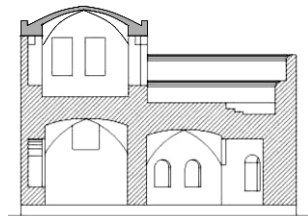


Figure 7: Section B-B.

3.2 The structural condition of the building before preservation

Al-Alami house suffered from several structural problems that threatened its survival and could lead to its collapse (Figure 8). These problems included cracks throughout the building. the growth of plants between the stones, the collapse of some parts, and the falling of some arch stones. Furthermore, moisture was widespread throughout the building, causing the stones to erode and weaken their strength.



Figure 8: East elevation of the courtyard before preservation

4 Methodology

Iwan was established in 1998 with support from the Politecnico di Milano. Since then, it actively was involved in several preservation activities of historical building preservation in Gaza. Following the 2008–2009 Israeli war on Gaza, Emergency Preservation Project—supported by the Prince Claus Fund—highlighted the urgent need to save surviving heritage structures in the city.

4.1 Local partnership, volunteering and training

Al-Alami House was one of the best examples of traditional Palestinian architecture in the city. It was not possible to start any preservation work for the lack of funding. The author as the director of Iwan held tough negotiations with the owner of the house to agree on its preservation and to grant IUG to use it for 5 years as a supporting center for architectural heritage. ICRC started a distinguished Job Creation Program, initially aimed at providing temporary employment for vulnerable Gazans. The program provided one month work for the poorest segments of the population. Iwan found this a golden opportunity to do something for historical

buildings in Gaza. After several sessions of negotiations, ICRC agreed to cooperate in the project. [14] This marked a pioneering effort by the ICRC to link humanitarian aid with cultural heritage preservation.

The project employed 200 workers and seven engineers in the architectural conservation project. Several architecture graduates from the Architectural Engineering Department, IUG, volunteered to provide training for the engineers and workers on the suitable ways of dealing with historical buildings starting from documentation up to the final stage.

4.2 forming networks of public and private bodies and stakeholders

This project was a rare opportunity for cooperation and partnership between numerous governmental, non-governmental, and private institutions. The Ministry of Labor contributed an additional number of workers through its own Job Creation Program. The Ministry of Public Works donated all the tiles needed to re-tile Al-Alami House. The Palestinian Contractors Union donated building materials and all the necessary electrical installations for the house. The Islamic Relief Foundation donated building materials and provided employment for several additional workers. Many building materials stores, and stone and marble factories in Gaza city also contributed stones and tiles to the project, despite the economic and political difficulties that the Palestinian community in Gaza is suffering from these days. This indicates the livability and high efficiency that this community enjoys.

4.3 Phases of the incremental preservation

On the first day, the participating workers and engineers were put under the direct supervision of Iwan officials and instructions and directions were clarified. The workers were then distributed to carry out specific tasks based on everyone's skill. Phases of the project included:

4.3.1 Building Preparation

It was necessary to prepare the building to allow for a smooth start and avoid any obstacles. All doors, windows, and electrical wiring inside the building were dismantled. All additions, such as metal coverings and asbestos sheets were removed. Scaffoldings were installed and secured, and all necessary tools were provided.

4.3.2 Cement Plaster Removal

Cement plaster was removed from all corners of the house, including the walls and ceilings. Work began on the upper floor, starting with the domed room, the upper iwan, and the southern room, followed by interior walls. Work then moved to the ground floor, including all its interior spaces, the courtyard facades, and the stairs. The plaster was removed in two successive stages. The first involved removing the plaster layer using a 200-gram hammer and chisel. The second involved removing small cement residues stuck to the hole using a 100-gram hammer to prevent damage to the natural stone and breakage. During this stage, temporary support was provided for some sections with serious structural problems until they could be addressed in subsequent steps.

4.3.3 Stone Cleaning

After the cement plaster was completely removed, the stones were cleaned to ensure all traces of cement were removed using wire brushes and distilled water, preparing them for the next step.

4.3.4 Treating Cracks and Fissures

The impact of the cement plaster on the walls and ceilings was clear, which impacted on the structural condition of the building. Removing the plaster resulted in the clear appearance of all cracks and fissures, and their precise locations and sizes were identified. This enabled us to determine the appropriate intervention mechanism for treating each crack, avoiding the dangers that might arise from its presence or its increase in size. Small and fixed cracks were treated by injecting them with special mortar and completely sealing them.

4.3.5 Arch Treatment

Problems existed in some arches of windows and doors. After removing the cement plaster, some arch stones became loose and moved from their place. Some of the arch stones were also damaged. Efforts were made to secure them in their proper place and reinforce them firmly, using steel anchors. The damaged stones were replaced with new similar pieces (Figure 19).

4.3.6 Treatment of Interior walls

The damaged stones were replaced. The dilapidated sections were rebuilt in their original form like the walls of the room adjacent ground floor iwan. The window overlooking the courtyard was enlarged to increase ventilation and light.

4.3.7 Outdoor plastering

Some exterior walls were built of rubble stone and could not be left exposed. All such walls were completely covered with special traditional plaster. (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Outdoor plaster works.

4.3.8 Stone restoration

The worn stones were replaced with similar stones to match the overall aesthetic appearance of the building (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Stone renovation of the southern facade of the first-floor iwan (before and after).

4.3.9 Dome plaster

The external cement plaster was completely removed, and the stones were thoroughly cleaned (Figure 11).



Figure 12: Removing cement plaster from the outer surface of the dome.

The dome was then covered with special traditional plaster, considering the slope of the roof's water drainage. It was also covered with a special transparent insulating paint for further protection (Figure 13).



Figure 13: First floor domed room and iwan after conservation.

4.3.10 External Facade Works

The southern and western facades of the building overlook the adjacent alleys and are in good structural condition. The cement plaster was meticulously removed, the natural stone was then cleaned and treated with grout, and the stone courses were then pointed (Figure 14).



Figure 14: South façade before (left) and after (right) restoration.

5 Multifunctional adaptive reuse

In February 2011, the house witnessed one of its happiest moments. The opening ceremony announced the start of a new history of the house. No one could imagine that this success could be achieved under all the difficult hardships in Gaza at that time. The house was used by Iwan for 5 years as Riyadh Al-Alami Center for Palestinian Heritage. Many activities took place in the house during this period especially those of the Architectural Engineering Departments of IUG and other Palestinian universities in Gaza (Figure 15).



Figure 15: School Children and their teachers in a visit to the house.

6 The End

In a very sad day for Riyadh Al-Alami Center for Palestinian Heritage, for Gaza and for the whole Palestine, the center was bombarded by Israeli USA made and armed fighters spreading death and silence over a place of hundreds of years of great life. Figure (16) shows the destruction of the southern and northern parts of the house which include the entrance, vestibule, the stairs, the bathroom, rooms 8,9, 14 and first-floor terrace.



Figure 16: destruction of the southern and northern parts of the house

7 Conclusion

Armed conflicts pose the most serious threat to architectural heritage. The destruction of the physical entity of the historical buildings is usually complicated with the destruction of state powers and community institutions. The atrocities of war and their social, economic, cultural, and environmental impacts leave the community with shock and devastation. In the war of December 2008, the Israeli occupation started a new era of its aggression against Gaza. This brought great destruction and devastation to large areas and had horrific effects on all aspects of life. The Palestinians of Gaza demonstrated a rare vitality in their interest in architectural heritage. The preservation of Al-Alami house proved the theoretical concept of heritage preservation^[15] in conflict and post conflict areas by the application of local partnership, community documentation, forming networks of stakeholders and volunteers, incremental maintenance, and multifunctional use. All what is needed is the

goodwill of a determined community who believes in its history and dignity and in its right to preserve its heritage and identity in addition to little encouragement from sincere friends and supporters. Would this be enough to restore the destroyed heritage in Gaza and to reconstruct the memories of its spaces? Yes definitely.

But also, there is a need to enforce worldwide culture and educational programs of justice and respect, a culture that considers the heritage of any nation as an asset of the whole world and should be protected.

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Dedication

To Nashwa Alramlawi, who participated in the preparation of the first Arabic draft of the article.

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