



Memoirs Engraved in Stone:  
**PALESTINIAN  
URBAN  
MANSIONS**

DIALA KHASAWNEH

Photographs by Mia Gröndahl

Drawings by Firas Rahhal



## RIWAQ

Centre for  
Architectural  
Conservation is a non-  
profit organization  
whose main aim is the  
protection of  
Palestinian architec-  
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historic old city centres, the rehabilitation of  
culturally important buildings, research and docu-  
mentation of Palestinian traditional architecture  
and community out-reach programs.

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*Memoirs Engraved in  
Stone: Palestinian*

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cover: The Qlaybo house, Jerusalem

backcover: The Daher house, Nazareth





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PALESTINIAN URBAN MANSIONS

RIWAQ would like to thank



Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation  
for their generous grant towards the cost of producing this book and  
RIWAQ's Monograph Series on the Architectural History of Palestine

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RIWAQ-Centre for Architectural Conservation  
&  
The Institute of Jerusalem Studies

Riwaq's Monograph Series on  
the Architectural History of Palestine

Riwaq's Monograph Series on  
The Architectural History of Palestine #2

RIWAQ & The Institute of Jerusalem Studies

Series Editor: Suad Amiry

Memoirs Engraved in Stone:  
**PALESTINIAN URBAN MANSIONS**

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ISBN 0-88728-279-2

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Published by

RIWAQ Centre for Architectural Conservation

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Design and layout: Turbo Design

Sponsored by:  **Sida** Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was made possible by a generous grant given to Riwaq by Sida (Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation). To them, Riwaq and I are profoundly thankful.

Working on this book was an enriching experience full of joy and sadness. Going through personal family memoirs too often brought tears to their eyes and mine. Through the many visits, I made many intimate friends. As we talked for hours they offered me food and in some cases gave me accommodation for one or two nights. How can I forget the intimacy and warmth of Mrs. Qlaybo; the touching conversation of architect Jaffar Tuqan about the two famed poets, his father Ibrahim Tuqan and his aunt Fadwa; or the Imam family in Hebron, who lovingly advised me to wear a head cover (*hijab*) so as to assure myself a place in heaven. They certainly acquired a special place in my heart on this earth.

The Qaramans from the village of Ebtin near Haifa took the trouble of accompanying me and my friend Dana for two days. I remember losing sleep that night for allowing myself to touch on the very traumatic experience of visiting their own house which is no more theirs.

There were other bitter-sweet experiences. The echo of the deserted and often empty houses such as the Tuqan house in Nablus and Khalaf house in Ramallah resonated for many days after my visit. Visiting the lonely old woman in the el-Bireh house evoked sad feelings as these beautiful and lovely mansions must have seen better days.

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This work would not have seen the light had it not been for the numerous people who gave their time and emotions generously. I will try to list them in the hope of not missing anyone:

*Acre:* Rimonda Hawwa el-Taweel and Khitam el-Edilbi and her family for suggesting houses and offering to show us 'Akka.

*Bethlehem:* the Ministry of Culture for lending us photographs and the architectural drawings. The architectural drawings for the Jasir Palace in Bethlehem were made by a group of students from both Bir Zeit and al-Najah Universities and their teachers who were supported by the Ministry of Culture.

*Beit Jala:* the Shahwan family.

*El-Bireh:* the 'Elayan family and the el-Bireh Municipality.

*Gaza:* 'Itaf Sharabi, Sa'ida, Sa'id and Nabil Shawwa and Nihad al-Mughany for suggesting the house, providing architectural drawings and accompanying our photographer. Thanks also go to Ahmad 'Abed and Mohib el-Masri for the architectural survey and research.

*Haifa:* Suad and Darwish Qaraman.

*Hebron:* the Imam family and Khalid Qawasmi.

*Jaffa:* Evelyn Khouri Baramki (Im Gabi) and Fakhri Jdai.

*Jenin:* Mrs. Abdulhadi and Kamal Abdulfattah for his suggestion of the house.

*Jerusalem:* Mrs. Qlaybo and her daughter Suhad and the Sa'eed Husseini family.

*Nablus:* Shadya Tuqan for taking us to the house and lunch, Amin Tuqan who showed us around the fascinating soap factory, and Jafar Tuqan for his stories.

*Nazareth:* 'Afaf and her daughter Bushra and Ziad el-Daher.

*Qalqeeliyeh:* the Sabe' family, the Qalqeeliyeh Municipality, and Mamduh Nofal.

*Ramallah:* Badia' Khalaf (Um Ziad), Issa Khalaf, and the Ramallah Municipality for providing us with the architectural plan and elevation drawings of the Khalaf house.

*Safad:* Im Farouq Shamma, wife of Fahmi Shamma and Mustafa Abbasi who took us around on an informative tour and suggested possible owners of the Shamma house.

*Ramleh:* Abu Jamil, the head of the Islamic Heritage of Ramleh.

To Dana for driving me to the north.

To my mother Arwa and sister Alma, for their encouragement and support during the writing of this book. My thanks also go to my father Sami.

For Turbo Design especially Lena Sobeh and Taisir Masrieh, for the beautiful layout of this book.

To Salim Tamari for his reading and valuable comments, to Matthew Brubacher for proofreading the final draft and Isam Nassar for follow up.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to RIWAQ, specially to its co-Directors Nazmi Jubeh and Suad Amiry for giving me this great opportunity. Special thanks also go to Inam Hato.

Truely, this book would not have seen the light had it not been for the relentless efforts of both Rochelle Davis and Suad Amiry. I thank Rochelle for her patience as she read, reread and edited various drafts of this book, and Suad Amiry for her advice and trust, and for devoting so much of her precious time for seeing this book through from beginning to end.

To all of them, my appreciation and gratitude.

*Diala Khasawneh*



## INTRODUCTION

The production of this book marks the beginning of an important cooperative endeavor between Riwaq and the Institute of Jerusalem Studies. Both joined efforts for the production of a Monograph Series entitled *The History of Architecture in Palestine*.

In an attempt to fill a gap in research and publications on Palestinian architectural heritage, in 1999 Riwaq took the decision to start a Research and Documentation Unit. The need for such publication is demonstrated in the very few books that exist on the subject. With the exception of Michael Burgoyne's *Mamluk Jerusalem (1987)*, Tawfiq Cannan's articles *The Palestinian Arab House; its Architecture and Folklore* published in the *Journal of Palestine Oriental Society (1932-1933)*, *Palestinian Village Home* (Amiry and Tamari 1989) and the book entitled, *Maisons de Bethleem* (Revault, Serge Santelli Weill-Rochant, 1997), there is very little on the subject.

This book, *Memoires Engraved in Stone: Palestinian Urban Mansions*, is the second architectural book in Riwaq's Monograph Series. The first, entitled *Traditional Floor Tiles in Palestine*, was published in October 2000; and a third monograph, entitled *Palestinian Rural Mansions*, will soon follow. While the current book deals with urban architecture and urban life, the third one will deal with a form of rural architecture often referred to as *Throne Village Architecture*.

### Architecture in Palestine

When speaking about the region's architecture, it is less problematic to talk about architecture in Palestine than about "Palestinian architecture." The first refers to all architectural styles found in Palestine from the differ-

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ent historic periods - whether Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Crusader, Ayoubid, Mamluk, Ottoman, or British Mandate- until today.

Moreover, it should be remembered that these architectural styles are often found in cities rather than in villages. In the case of Palestine - which played a relatively marginal political and economic role in comparison to Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad - architectural styles are found mostly in Jerusalem (Mamluk and Ottoman), Acre, and to a lesser extent in the town of Nablus. Architectural styles are often also related to “noble architecture”, that is, to architecture of the political elite and the urban notables.

In rural areas, one can perhaps feel more at ease talking about Palestinian vernacular architecture or what is known as “architecture with no architects.” In this case vernacular architecture seems to have prevailed for many centuries. Until the mid twentieth century, the typical Palestinian peasant house maintained its architectural characteristics and features. Both spatial organization as well as functional divisions (reflecting gender and kinship separation), went through critical physical transformations as the village was economically transformed from an inwardly looking agrarian community into and outward-looking wage labor community.

*Memoirs Engraved in Stone: Palestinian Urban Mansions* focuses on an important era in the history of Palestinian towns and architecture. The first two decades of the British Mandate (1920s and 1930s) were characterized by rapid urban growth and the first urban sprawl as important residential areas formed away from historic urban centers. The lavishly built, individualized urban villas were highly decorated and elegantly designed by local architects. These villa-like mansions reflected the new life style of an affluent social class that was in formation in most Palestinian towns around this time.

The British Mandate invested a great deal in Palestine due to its geographic location as well as its important political role. The Mandate Government provided many jobs for civil servants, police and school teachers. The improved security conditions, the infrastructure, such as roads and the railway, connecting Jaffa to Jerusalem (1893) increased tourism and encouraged investments in Palestine. The citrus plantations and the ports of Haifa and Jaffa also provided new job opportunities. It was also around this time that Palestinian immigrants to both Americas started sending back money to their families in Palestine so as to build the rich immigrant mansions. The eclectic architectural styles of many of these mansions (the Jasir Palace in Bethlehem and the Shahwan Palace in Beit Jala) are a witness to the European influence that came through the two Americas. For example, the use of sculpture in the two mansions is certainly a western influence as we rarely find sculpture in other Palestinian mansions. However, the sculptures were carved by local stone carvers.

As the title indicates, this book deals with urban mansions as opposed to rural mansions. Historically and architecturally, urban houses differed in form and function from the typical peasant village architecture (see the *Palestinian Village Home* 1989). While the spatial organization of the village and the house reflected the social and economic life of peasants and the agrarian community, urban architecture reflected the life of traders and the commercial community. Up until the beginnings of the British Mandate (1923), these differences were quite distinct. However, by the 1930s a new architectural “hybrid” which belonged to both towns and villages started emerging. For example, the “villa” type was a new architectural style which existed in villages going through a process of urbanization as well as in towns.

The distinction between “town” and “village” is quite problematic. Many of today’s towns were villages in transformation during the 1930s. For example, the villages of Beit Sahur,

Ramallah, and el-Bireh were good examples of villages on their way to becoming towns. The examples taken from such “villages” for this book were “urban”-like villas that resembled mansions built in urban centers like Jerusalem and Haifa. In other words, the 1930s marked the emergence of new residential areas built away from the tightly knit fabric typical of the traditional village.

In this book the author takes us through seventeen houses in different Palestinian towns. The criteria for choosing these houses was mostly their architectural qualities. Even though most of the examples were from the British Mandate period (1920s and 1930s), a few were from much earlier periods. For example, the Tuqan mansion in Nablus, the Imam house in Hebron, the Hawwa house in Acre, and the Abdilhadi house in Jenin belong to late Ottoman periods. Hence the difference in architectural spatial organization, scale and functions. Except for the Jasir Palace in Bethlehem, which is a courtyard house, the rest of the examples, including the Shahwan house in Beit Jala, could easily be described as three-aisle villas.

The major challenge this book faced was tracing the history of people, houses and owners in pre-1948 Palestine, as the book tried to include every town in “historic Palestine.” This was problematic as many towns and mansions have witnessed dramatic transformations since they were built.

In coastal Palestine (Israel today), many of these mansions lost their owners as they were evicted by Israel and hence today have “new owners.” The house of the Qaraman family in Haifa is now a supermarket. When the author visited the house with the Qaraman family, the new Jewish owner aggressively prevented the author from taking photographs.

In the case of Jaffa, Zahi Khouri, the son of Wadi' Khouri, is relentlessly trying to buy his father's house from the Jewish family that resides in the house today. Though the new occupants were willing to allow us in, they were nervous about the whole episode.

In the case of Safad, where about 13,000 Palestinian lived before 1948, the house of the rich Arab family Shamma stood there as a witness to the city's history. Using the internet, e-mails and phonebooks the author managed to trace the granddaughter of the owner, who lives in Amman now. It was difficult to enter the house; hence the plans of the Safad house were not included here.

Certain obstacles prevented the inclusion of some towns such as Ramla, Lod, and Tiberias. The political difficulty of getting a permit to Gaza made it impossible for the author to travel there. Hence the data had to be collected and sent to the author to finalize it. The fact of not having one single Arab living in the towns of Safad and Tiberias made tracing their owners, who now live in the diaspora, extremely difficult.

Tracing the families of these houses evoked bitter memories of Palestinian history, in which about 850, 000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes in 1948.

The author of this book reveals the social and political history of Palestine in the most touching and human way. Architecture becomes, as it should be, a mirror reflecting human life. As the reader will soon realize, this book tells the history of Palestine and its people as engraved in the silent stones.

*Suad Amiry*