



by Aysil Tükel Yavuz

Rehabilitation of Nablus Old Town

Nablus, Palestine



Architect

Old Town Rehabilitation Centre: Maher Hanbali

Client

City of Nablus

Design

1995 and ongoing

Completed

1995 and ongoing

I. Introduction

Nablus, to the North of Jerusalem, is the largest town in Palestine. It is situated in a valley between two mountains. The valley has a number of springs and it produces many fruits. The main crop is olives, which are processed as olive oil and soap. Founded by the Romans, it has been under Ommayad, Abbasid, Crusader, Mamluk, and Ottoman rule. The old town's domestic architecture and monuments are remarkably intact, homogeneous, and colourful. The town started to expand toward the slopes of the mountains during the 1920s and this accelerated in the 1960s. At present, the old town is dilapidated. The houses are divided and rented. There was a dire need for infrastructure. The need for rehabilitation prompted the Municipality to undertake several projects simultaneously. An infrastructure project realised from 1991 to 1993 supplied clean water to the buildings, partly updated the sewage system, and moved the electric and telephone lines underground. The streets were paved and underpasses were restored. The façades of several buildings were cleaned and pointed. Interventions were concentrated in public spaces and aimed at restoring pride to the Nablus old town and encouraging the Nablusi to participate in the rehabilitation the town.

II. Contextual Information

a. *Historical background*

Nablus is the largest town in Palestine on the West Bank. It lies 66km to the North of Jerusalem. It is located at a junction in a pass which links the Mediterranean coastal plane in the West to the Jordan Valley in the East. It is strategically located on main trade and pilgrimage routes. It connects to Beirut in the North, to Damascus in the Northeast, to Amman in the East, to Mecca in the South, and via Jerusalem to Cairo in the Southwest.

The Canaanite city of Shechem was always assumed to be the antecedent of Nablus, however excavation showed that it is another settlement, located at the eastern suburbs of the present town. Nablus was founded as a new city, at a location very near Shechem by the Romans in 71 A.D. and was Flavia Neapolis, honouring the Emperor Flavius Vespasian. Before the Arab conquest in 636 A.D., the town saw five centuries of intense conflict for Nablus. During the Ottoman rule, which started in 1517, it was the district capital, or *sanjak*, under the province, or *eyalet*, of Damascus. It did not have strong ties with Istanbul and was ruled for the Ottomans by local feudal lords. This distant rule by the Ottomans continued until the reign of Ibrahim Pasha, son of the Egyptian Governor Muhammad Ali Pasha.

Nablus has long been a Moslem Arab city with a small community of Samaritans, a few Jews, and a few Christians. It came under the British Mandate of Palestine between 1923 and 1948 and became part of Jordan after it was taken by the Arab armies in the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli war. Starting in the 1930s it became a centre of resistance to Jewish immigration. The first Arab National Committee was founded in Nablus. In 1967 it was occupied by Israel. From 1986 onwards the municipality has been in the hands of the Palestinians and it is now one of the towns under the Palestinian Authority.

Nablus is strategically located in the valley between Mount Ebel (Jabal Sitt Salaymiyya) and Mount Gerisim (Jabal al Tur). It is a very fertile valley with many springs. All sorts of fruits, figs, walnuts, apricots, pomegranates, mulberries, and vines, are grown there, but olives are the major agricultural product. Olive oil and soap have been the town's main industry throughout its history. Although the production of soap has diminished, the town still produces very good quality soap, olive oil, and the famous sweets. The main source of income is trade and commerce.

Nablus contains abundant signs of the many rules and periods it has been through. The excavation at the Tel-al-Balate have proven the existence and location of Shechem. The Roman city, underneath the

old is reflected in the street layout of the historic town. Several excavations carried out at different parts of the town have brought to light a theatre, columned streets, temples, stadium, and an aqueduct, parts of which were above ground.

The crusader churches, as well as other buildings, were mostly incorporated into the Moslem monuments, as in the case of the churches converted to the Great Mosque and the Al-Nassar Mosque. The long Islamic period has seen the erection of many religious and public buildings. A preliminary survey enumerates 97 existing monuments. Among them are 11 mosques, 15 shrines and tombs, 3 *zawiyas*, 6 baths, 5 khans and markets, and 16 spring-fed fountains and wells.

Travellers in all periods mention the richness of the valley, the abundance of commercial goods, the taste of the fruits, and the soap factories. The beautiful houses of Nablus were also always noted. The Nablus houses have always been built with stone and consisted of interconnected cubical volumes. The independent yet strong local governors and lords during the late Ottoman Period created a certain town aristocracy. They constructed large buildings and complexes. These palaces or mansions, called *dar*, *qasr*, and *bayt* in various publications, accommodated the governor's family as well as his administrative and military organisation. The prominent families had mansions as well. The fact that there are 21 such buildings speaks to the town's wealth and power.

The population of Nablus is 160'000. There are, in addition, 30'000 refugees in the camps just outside the city.

Immediate Surroundings

Nablus has expanded enormously in the 20th century. Its population has increased to 160'000 from 10'000 since the end of the last century. Today, most of this population lives in villas on the mountain slopes and use the old town for commercial and religious purposes. The population's move out of the old town began in the 1920s and increased during the 1960s. It is said that this is related to the advent of the automobile because cars could not reach the majority of the houses in the old town.

The high buildings which form the boundary of the old town in the North, the houses, and the apartment buildings in the new town are concrete skeletons faced with local stone.

Nablus suffered a serious earthquake in 1927 in which many dwellings and monuments collapsed or were severely damaged.

The town does not have many green spaces. The few trees in the courtyards of the houses is all the green that the old town has. There are few clusters of trees on the lower parts of the slopes.

b. Local architectural character

The Nablus old town displays many of the characteristics of eastern Mediterranean towns. The two or three story buildings are made of stone and use a system of arches for structure. The Roman town lying underneath is reflected in the plan of several streets. Two or three-storey houses line the narrow streets with extensions towards the back usually have a courtyard as the junction of the various parts of the houses. The old town displays a pleasant consistency mixed with lots of variation. *Hosh*, the extended family house was the basic unit of dwelling, as indicated by the existence of more than 90 *hosh* in the old town today. These usually have flat roofs and occasionally have a dome partially protruding over cubes of stone. The interior surfaces are plastered and the exteriors have exposed, coursed stone walls with pointing. The houses extend over the street creating an underpass. These rooms have a view of the street on both sides and are used for living rooms and/or guest rooms. In the case of a three storey house, the underpass carries two rooms above it.

The existence of more than a hundred underpasses in the old city shows how common this type is. On the walls opposite the room facing the street, there are double lintelled or arched windows which originally had wood grills and shutters opening to the inside. These rooms are mostly cross vaulted but are sometimes domed and carry the house to the street without violating privacy. This feature seems to date back to the earliest houses, judging from the variety of the double centred, pointed profiles of the vaults. There are very high lancet profiles reminiscent of the Crusader period and lower, equilateral lower ones that are typical of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The ground floors of several buildings house a soap factory. There are 31 of these in the old town but many are not used.

At the end of the 18th century, when the local governments began to grow more prosperous and more independent from the Ottoman rule, there began a period of construction of large mansions and palaces, many of which are still standing. These have multiple courtyards and sections for work, ceremony, family, and servants. One on Al Nasser Street has a façade length of about 120m and ends with the Jami-al Khidr (1889-90). One of the rooms of the house has a large window opening to the gallery of the mosque, indicating the integral relationship between of the mosque and the mansion. Many of these houses display the design and decorative repertoire of late-Ottoman houses seen all over the territory.

The smaller Nablusi houses do not have much exterior decoration, but the interiors have ornate niches, cupboard, and pools inside large *iwans*, as well as in the courtyards.

The town's many springs are marked by the fourteen fountains along the streets. One of them, called Al Saqa, is the fountain at which the house's water carrier filled his containers.

Nablus has monuments from all periods of history which continued to be used today. It is a vital town with, remarkably, an intact urban fabric.

c. Climatic conditions

Nablus has hot, dry summers and moderate, rainy winters. It seldom snows in the winters. The summer average is 32 °C and the winter average is 12 °C. Prevailing winds are from the Southwest and Northwest.

d. Site topography

Nablus is 570 m above the sea level. The Jabal Sitt Sulaymiyya to the North is 860 m high and the Jabal al Tur to the South rises to 745 m. The old town is in the valley between these two mountains and it runs in the northwest-southeast direction. It lies on the flat ground and on the lower slopes of the mountains. The new town has spread to the higher slopes.

III. Programme

a. Conditions of programme formulation

The town of Nablus started to expand toward the slopes during the 1920s. The large family houses were occupied by poor relatives, were rented out, or were virtually abandoned. The very large *qasr*, like Tuggan and Abd-al Hadi, are only partially occupied, mostly due to their dilapidated condition. The buildings in the old towns are lived in but they have not been decently repairs, only alterations to meet the basic needs of the people using them have been made. The 1987 report by M. Burgoyne refers to buildings left empty in disrepair, to aluminium louvers that are out of character, to ill-maintained streets, and uncollected garbage. The people involved in the project have also complained about the local population because of their lack of interest in the old town and the historic nature of its

buildings.

In the 1980s the Israelis tore down several buildings, moved the people out, and kept the lots empty. During the Intifada, bombs demolished 7 buildings and structurally damaged 67 others. About 20% of the population moved out and settled in the new town. In their place, villagers and the refugees moved in. When the Intifada started, the old town had a population of between 20 and 30 thousand. Of these, 5'000 moved out and another 3'000 moved in.

The Intifada also has an effect on the use of buildings. Because the shops were closed for long periods commercial activity, as well as production, moved to the houses. Adjacent houses were connected and a completely new circulation pattern that did not use the streets was created.

b. Objectives

The ultimate objective is the total rehabilitation of the old town. Although not clearly defined, different stages of the rehabilitation have different objectives. The first stage, which seems to be this one, is to upgrade public amenities and better the appearance of the old town by façades. The aim of this stage is to draw attention to the old centre, to convey the feeling of belonging, and to raise public awareness. The municipality, which carries responsibility for the project, and the people involved in the project, are convinced that this is a strategic way to get the owners of the buildings involved in the restoration.

c. Functional requirements

The old town is largely inhabited, even though the conditions are poor. Many of the dwellings need repair, resanitation, and maintenance. A smaller group, consisting of larger buildings and clusters, are more dilapidated, have collapsed sections, and need more serious structural interventions.

In the 19th century, a large group of buildings seem to have been rebuilt or enlarged at the time of the construction of many new mansions. These have rich programmes, large spaces, and many rooms. Today these mansions are subdivided and accommodate several families.

IV. Description

a. Project data

There is no exact quantitative information available because the design of the master plan is being done simultaneously with the work. RIWAQ was commissioned to register the buildings and to transfer the information onto maps. According to their figures, 2'850 edifices were registered in the old town. According to architect Abdel-Hadi, Mohammed, of the Rehabilitation Centre, there are 108 underpasses in the old town.

b. Evolution of design concepts

A report for the restoration and conservation of Nablus old town was prepared by M. Burgoyne after a two-week survey in 1987. It was commissioned by the British Council. Burgoyne stresses the need "to restore the sense of pride to the old city" and makes several practical recommendations relating to maintenance, face-lifting, infrastructure, garbage collection, traffic, tourism, and proposes new uses for some specific buildings. What is done so far suggests that this report has been used as a major document. The start of the clean water project which was financed by UNDP made the infrastructure project the motor to drive the others to follow. Once the streets were opened up it was easier to do the sewage, electricity, and telephone improvements together with the clean water project.

The general rehabilitation project so far includes:

- Infrastructure including the complete clean-water piping, partial repair of sewage system, and moving sections of the electric and telephone lines underground.
- Partial pavement of the streets.
- Plastering and pointing of underpasses and the façades of the buildings connected to them.
- Restoration of a few buildings, such as a house and bath restored by the owners and supervised by the Rehabilitation Centre, and a house, over an underpass, restored by the Municipality.
- Several buildings are to be restored but those plans have not implemented yet.

c. *Structure, Materials, Technology*

The interventions occurred at the fountains, underpasses, and at the façades and walls adjoining them.

The barrel or cross-vaults of the underpasses did not have serious structural problems in general, as seen in the photographs taken before the interventions. The majority of them were missing the thick mortar-plaster layer on the intrados. This is a layer directly related to the construction technique of the rubble-stone vaults. The irregular stones forming the intrados were imbedded in a thick layer of mortar placed on the formwork, their sharp ends projecting downwards to create a better bond. When the vault lost this layer, the stones were exposed as teeth. This mortar-plaster layer was redone with cement and lime mortar and was whitewashed. The joints between the stones were cleaned and pointed with a mortar consisting of 1 part cement, ½ part lime, and 2 parts yellow sand. This mixture is used in all the pointing work.

The façades or walls were basically only pointed. If they were ruined, the remains were consolidated as they were.

The fountains had varying treatments. Some like the As Saqa and the Al Aga fountains were simply cleaned and pointed. The As Sokkar Fountain, where the faucet was within a rectangular recess, received a lancet arch inside this frame. The Upper Salah Fountain had a damaged base and it received a completely new face, a pointed trefoil arch on attached columns.

The stone used for the pavement is the *sultani* stone used for the original large, flagstone pavements. The new ones are thinner and smaller and have corrugations on the surface which run parallel to the long side of the stone. Where the pavement meets the sides of the street there is a strip of uncorrugated stone, 5 cm lower than street level. This band collects water and directs it to the drains. There are no sidewalks on the shopping streets but there are in the newly arranged squares. The drains' metal grills of the drains can be horizontal or vertical within the height of the sidewalk.

The few buildings that were restored did not have major structural problems. Concrete is used for minor structural problems and stone is used for wall surfaces.

The simple technology used is local, as are the materials and the labour force.

Three of the Rehabilitation Centre architects, who studied in Italy, were sent to the University of Venice for four months of training in conservation.

No consultants are mentioned. The contractors are regular ones, not specialists in restoration work.

V. Construction Schedule and Costs

a. History of project

The first decisions concerning the rehabilitation of Nablus old town go back to 1970s. Several projects were done jointly with the Jordan University in Amman but those were not implemented. In the 1980's Israel stopped these projects. In 1983, an Israeli was appointed and the Palestinians refused to work with him. The Municipality passed to the Palestinians in 1986 and the first project was the restoration of the Suq al Qumash, the clothes market. There were no structural problems so the work was more refurbishing, like renewing the shopfronts, the lattice, and the paintwork. The people were very interested and came to see what was done.

After the Intifada (1987-1993) the Nablus Municipality started to work on the old centre again. It cooperated with Al Najah University in the town. Several courses in the Faculty of Architecture concentrated on the old town and many buildings were surveyed. The Municipality provided the maps and manual help. The RIWAQ foundation listed and registered the buildings, revised the existing base map, and the information collected for registration was transferred onto the maps. These maps will be used to determine the specific areas for further study and work. A special group was formed within the municipality, called the Old Town Rehabilitation Centre.

The clean water project was the first project to be implemented. It was started in 1991 and finished in 1993. The rehabilitation project was approved in 1995.

What is done so far can be summarised as follows:

- The clean water project is completely finished.
- The paving of the main shopping streets, and 50% of the side streets is finished.
- The sewage system was not a major problem. It was built as stone channels by the Romans and extended by the Arabs. The parts of the sewage system that are under the paved streets were repaired.
- About 50% of the electric and telephone wires were transferred to the ground. The telephone company is becoming a private company which will pass the lines through the pipes that the municipality prepares. Work on the electrical system was more expensive. Whenever possible the electric wires were put underground. They were put underground in the old town square before the new pavement. When it was not possible to buy them, the wires were collected together into one thick cable and attached to wall surfaces.
- About 25% of the underpasses are finished. The rest will be finished in 2 or 3 years.
- Not many façades and walls were pointed and those that were will be incorporated into the restorations of the individual houses. The main purpose of the intervention is to create a generally better appearance.
- The, *manara*, clock-tower was restored. The stones were cleaned with metal brushes and were pointed.
- Two squares were rehabilitated. The Aliasmeineh square, at the west entrance of the old town contains the *diwan*, or community centre. Built in 1992, it serves as a cultural centre. There was

an exhibition of modern Egyptian ceramics artists when I visited and there were many other visitors besides myself. The other square is Al Qrion Square which received a stepped platform and a mural designed by a French artist.

- Four fountains have been restored and a house over one of the restored underpasses was restored. A bath and another house were restored by their owners, supervised by Rehabilitation Centre architects.

Beyond this, there are several studies and projects for all types of dwellings. The projects are well prepared and detailed. The Tuqqan Palace project will adapt and re-use the building as a museum. The building has to be expropriated and therefore the project is awaiting funding as well as approval from the Palestinian Authority.

b. Total costs and main sources of financing

The incomplete and incoherent information on time, area, economics provided about the second stage of the project, prompted me to ask for more information. Some discrepancies apparently resulted from a language problem. Regardless, the sum spent for a number of items has increased despite the fact that the end-date is still July 1996. It is likely that this sum includes work done after this date. I rely more on the information given to verbally me than in the reports, although that does not resolve all of the discrepancies. It was suggested that it is difficult to give an accurate estimate because the work is still going on.

The initial budget was USD 3'900'000 but the municipality contributed another USD 400'000, adding up to a total of USD 4'300'000.

- USD 1'500'000 was spent on the clean water system. 35 km of pipes were installed.
- USD 2'500'000 was spent on updating of the existing sewer system underneath the repaved areas, 5 km of piping were installed.
- USD 400'000 was spent on burying the electrical wires. This was also limited to the repaved area.
- USD 600'000 US is shown as labour costs and USD 1'100'000 for materials but the actual cost of repaving the roads is not apparent. In the older document it was reported to cost as USD 800'000.
- A total of USD 200'000 is shown as "other". It is likely that this sum was spent on the underpasses and the façades. The cost of that work was shown as USD 70'000 in the earlier document.

The international contribution was said to be 67% and the national contribution, 33% in the earlier document. The USD 400'000 that the Municipality contributed would increase the percentage of the national funds.

c. Qualitative analysis of costs

There are no relevant comparative costs. It was stated by the architects that the cost was about the same as Hebron and less than Jerusalem, but no evidence was supplied.

d. Maintenance costs

There are no plans for maintenance yet.

VI. Technical Assessment

a. Functional assessment

What is done so far is very functional, especially the stone pavement, which is modest and unifying.

b. Climatic performance

The corrugations on the stone pavement absorb light in about the same way that the original flagstones did. The vaults of the underpasses have reacquired their original light and shade relationship. The few restored buildings do not have any changes which relate to climate.

c. Ageing and maintenance

The work done is too new to create major maintenance problems. However there are already some cracks in the pavement stones because they are thinner than they should be.

d. Design features

The design of the street pavement is harmonious with the old town, it blends in and does not attract ones attention right away. The façade rehabilitation is not disturbing, perhaps because it has not yet been done all over the old town. The stylistic reconstruction of the two fountains could have be avoided.

VII. Users

a. Beneficiaries of the programme

The people of Nablus benefit from the project. Almost everything done so far is for public use, since the old town is still the commercial centre, the whole town benefits from the project.

b. Response to project

The shopkeeper on the paved streets are very content with a cleaner and healthier surrounding. I got the impression that the citizens who have houses in the old town do not yet respond positively enough. The town needs their interest and financial contribution to restore their buildings and rehabilitate the town.

VIII. Persons involved

Project personnel

The Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Nablus old town is chaired by the Chief engineer of the Municipality, Mr. Maher Hanbali. The seven architects of the Centre are Mohammad Abdelhadi, Ayman Rabba, Rania Taha, Samir Samirat, Joana Feidi, Nuha Al-Kukhon. The Centre works with seven contractors. Nedel Salamek has done the infrastructure and the pavement, Yasser Abd-al-latif, is responsible for most of the restoration and maintenance work done on the underpasses and the façades, Abdelaziz Masri has worked on the underpasses and the façades, Aldelaziz Masri has worked

on the fountains and the underpasses, Jamal Sawalka, Saeed Sharaf, and Saleh Abu-Nimek have done similar jobs.

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