

# The Palestinian Museum

## In Celebration of Palestinian History and Culture

cultural institutions throughout historic Palestine as well as abroad. Created in response to the need for devising new strategies to address the complex Palestinian cultural geographies – dispersion, political incoherence, denied access to Jerusalem, oppression by the Israeli occupying forces – it will seek to open up discussions about the role of museums as spaces designed not simply to hold objects and collections, but to nurture research, dialogue, creative interpretation, and interactive curation of the past.

The opening will mark the completion of the first phase of construction, whereas the second phase envisions an expansion of the museum building to 9,000 m<sup>2</sup> by 2026.

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to deliver understated but powerful, even poetic solutions by masterfully “inserting” buildings into complex terrains, juxtaposing its philosophy with ego-driven buildings unaware of their surroundings. Its latest creation – the Palestinian Museum – emerged as a series of interlocking low triangular



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One of the most ambitious cultural enterprises to emerge in Palestine in recent years is almost ready to open its doors to the public. The Palestinian Museum, which was launched as an idea by Taawon-Welfare Association back in 1997, will open on May 18, a few days after the 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Nakba*. It will be housed in its newly completed 3,500 m<sup>2</sup> building, located north of Jerusalem in Birzeit, in close proximity to another important Palestinian intellectual and cultural hub, Birzeit University. Or rather, this will be its point of departure, as the Palestinian Museum, unlike most national museums, will reach out to its scattered audiences through a network of satellites – partnerships and collaborations with various

The impressive museum building was designed by the Dublin-based architecture firm Heneghan Peng, which has won such significant commissions as the Grand Egyptian Museum and Giant’s Causeway Visitors’ Centre in Northern Ireland. It was recently commissioned to design the Canadian Canoe Museum. Deeply interested in architecture’s relationship with its natural environment, the firm is able

buildings set amidst cascading agricultural terraces, their contours structured to be recognizable, yet following the natural points of the site and matching the contours of the surrounding hills.

The architects and the Jordanian landscape designer Lara Zureikat have drawn on the fact that Palestine has been at the crossroads of many important trade routes and has consequently

been influenced by many diverse cultures. Informed by this history of the terraced landscape, their approach to the Palestinian Museum was to draw from the museum's immediate site to tell a larger story of a diverse culture. The 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> of gardens, which include the most familiar original and long-adopted Palestinian plants, trees, shrubs, and perennials, will also narrate the horticultural history of Palestine.

The museum was built by Palestinian contracting and project-management companies that were established in exile but have since returned, as well as by local subcontractors. It is also Palestine's first LEED-certified energy-efficient green building. Engineer Badawi Qawasmi, a founding member of the Palestine Green Building Council, pointed out that the building will be a

to preserve its internal temperature throughout summer and winter. Other green solutions include collecting rainwater for reuse and relying on solar energy to heat water for public use, while refining wastewater and reusing it for irrigating the gardens. Wheelchair accessibility has also been integrated into the building's design.

While the architect and the landscape designer tackled nature and stone, the team of curators has been laboring on the museum's program. Omar Al-Qattan, the museum's chairman, recognizes the dispersal and exile of the Palestinians after their expulsion in 1948 as a core preoccupation for the team. He borrows Pier Paolo Pasolini's term "cultural genocide" to describe the effects that forced exile and war had on Palestinians' memory, customs, oral

*Historic Timeline* is another Web-based project. This interactive record of the modern history of Palestine will present key events that have shaped Palestine from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, providing links to valuable historical material (documents, maps, photos, videos, audio files, etc.) alongside each event.

The museum's first satellite exhibition, *At the Seams: a Political History of Palestinian Embroidery*, will open at the newly refurbished Dar el-Nimer for Arts and Culture in Beirut, a week after the museum's main building is inaugurated. Drawing on the exceptional collections and knowledge of Malak al-Husseini and Widad Kawar, British curator Rachel Dedman explores how textiles as a form of material history have reflected

looking sense, but rather to remind ourselves, the world, and Israelis in particular, that there is no just and peaceful future for the country until that injustice is properly and fully redressed," stresses Omar Al-Qattan. However, although the *Nakba* is a continuing tragic influence, the creators of the museum do not accept it as a point where the story starts or ends. "We did not want to be trapped in a false dichotomy with the Israeli "story." Palestinian history is far richer than to be seen solely through the conflict with the Zionist project, however central and tragic that has been, just as it would be deeply reductive to view the history of Judaism solely through the narrow prism of the Zionist movement," notes Al-Qattan.



*The Palestinian Museum, the ambitious cultural enterprise.*

model for environmental sustainability in Palestine: "We will use the museum's building as an educational case study to deliver training workshops for engineers, contractors, university students, and other professionals." Green solutions in design and construction will enable the museum to consume 37 percent less water and 27 percent less energy. The process of "dry-fix cladding," which involves fixing stones without the concrete, will allow for the creation of a vacuum around the building's structure, helping

history, music, dance, and artisanal skill base, which he sees as equally if not more valuable than museum pieces.

Defying conventions, the museum will launch without a collection and rely on touring exhibitions and digital and interactive platforms. One of them is the project *Family Album*, part of the audio-visual archive, which sought to unearth the photographic treasures hidden away in many Palestinian homes and which now contains a digital archive of around 12,000 photographs. *The*



dramatic social and political transformations in the region since 1948. Beirut is the first location where the museum will act upon its mission to deliver programs to Palestinians who are unable to visit its main building in the Occupied Territories.

*Nakba* remains at the core of this important cultural project. "No project that focuses on modern history in Palestine can avoid reflecting on that date – not in the morbid, backward-

The Palestinian Museum, deeply embedded in the difficult history of its landscape and essentially created from loss, promises to mark a much-needed new departure for the celebration of Palestinian culture and history.

For more information, visit [www.palmuseum.org](http://www.palmuseum.org).

