

# The Palestinian Village Habitat in the Central Highlands

Courtesy of Riwaq

The Palestinian village in the central highlands appears from a distance as a cluster of boulders emerging out of a hilly landscape. It lies in harmony with its surroundings until it becomes an element of nature itself.

Digging deep, one uncovers the village as part of an ecosystem; it is a holistic and complete system of networks, activities, functions, and building components that work together in a more or less synergetic and congruent way. Over time, it has become an everlasting model of self-sufficiency. It has a quality of wholeness: every part contributes to the bigger whole. Underlying this village character is the Palestinian farmer and the peasants as a collective, which has greatly influenced the development of Palestinian society.

Six basic components make up the village habitat of Palestine: the courtyard (*al-hoash*); the water spring (*al-'ein*); the agricultural fields; the public plaza (*sahet al-balad*); the mosque; and the meeting hall

*Khabye (mud bin), al Janiya, Ramallah. Photo by David Landis- RIWAQ Photo Archive.*



1. Men and women harvesting the cereal crop, Ramallah.

2. Palestinian family eating in the field, Ramallah.

3. Women crushing olives with stone, Ramallah area, British Mandate. Photo courtesy of American Colony, Jerusalem.

4. Women's communal activity, Ramallah.

(*al-diwan*). These components together shape the majority of Palestinian villages in the highlands of Palestine.

Although the house itself was the core of the village, the availability and proximity of a water spring (*al-'ein*) and a fertile plot of land/valley were crucial factors in choosing the village setting. The actual construction took place on the least fertile land, which resulted in hilltop villages or leeward side villages.

Depending on the formerly mentioned essential features, a family would embark on building their house and landscaping the surrounding nature. Nearby stones and rubble would be

used to build the house, terrace the garden (*al-hakoora*), and, in some cases, tile the floors.

The building technique was based on a system of knowledge that had been learned and accumulated over time. The building process itself was carried collectively by the family as a communal event. All parts of the family contributed according to their role in the household through ensuring coherence between their needs and the available resources.

In addition, the walls served multiple functions and were used as a protection, a structure, a thermal mass





(storing the heat during the day and releasing it at night), bedding storage, and pigeon nests that also enhanced air movement and promoted ventilation.

The house had sufficient openings in terms of size, number, and orientation in order to provide quality daylight and cross ventilation for the hours of the day that the house was to be used. The partition walls were mud bins (*khawabi*) used to store cereals.

The livestock were considered an important part of the family and represented a source of food and warmth. They were greatly appreciated and were housed on the lower level of the house (*al-qaa'*), which is another example of coherence with the surrounding habitat: maximising the use of space, minimising the exhaustion of resources, and taking full advantage of everything in the immediate environment.

Whereas the livestock were used for dairy and meat products in the peasant diet, the seasonal plantation of vegetables and fruits complemented the Palestinian main dishes. The family would choose a small plot of land in front of the house to be terraced with dry walls (*salaseh*), to form a boundary, in order to plant vegetables and fruit. Mirroring the peasant's approach of maximising the use of everything, families would dry or pickle their surplus of vegetables and fruits to be used during other seasons.

After having built the house on the least-fertile land and terracing the house garden, the family would then choose the most suitable land nearby for its winter and summer crops, each according to the plot of land's orientation to the sun and wind. This pattern followed that of ancient civilisations engaged in cereal production and in using agricultural skills to create a customised form of trade (*al-'ouneh*).

Elaborating on the physical morphology of the Palestinian village, the one or two families that settled there became vital to the organic growth of the village. The family grew numerically, due to marriages, and the sons started to build adjacent to their parents for various social, economic, and security reasons. As a result, the courtyard house was created.

The distant family, or newly arrived farmers would live nearby, creating their own complex of courtyard houses (*hoash*). Together, these houses would form the organic morphology of

the village. A network of narrow winding paths or alleys between the houses was thus created, apparently as a result of following the wind routes and taking into consideration the favoured summer winds and the inconvenient winter winds in some villages. These alleys converged into ventilated corridors that connected the houses and yet retained the privacy of each family by facilitating the summertime air movement and blocking the wintertime cold winds.

The factors that distinguished Palestinian villages were the peasants' daily activities and the manner in which they engaged nature and the surrounding landscape. These activities were considered the spirit of the Palestinian village and played a role in demarcating undefined spaces.

All the household activities that utilised water, except for cooking, took place at the water spring, which was the site of numerous activities during the summer months, including drawing water, bathing, and washing clothes and dishes. These communal activities served, among other things, as a motivation to recite poetry and sing

folkloric songs together. They could also give rise to gossip and village conspiracies. During winter, households depended mostly on the water cisterns.

Another major theme that is worth mentioning is food. The cooking, eating, and family gathering took place in the outdoor courtyard, which became a central space in the house. This courtyard is similar to an outdoor

Over time, the Palestinian village has created an independent ecosystem along with its surrounding habitat. The village was built and developed by farmers who appreciated the land and the animals as a source of food and livelihood. The farmers' respect for both the land and the animals served to prevent exploitation and neglect. In addition, collective activities and communal celebrations gave the village a particular spirit that is reflected in various folkloric songs and dances.

Bird Migration, 'Ein Qiniya, Ramallah.  
Photo by David Landis- RIWAQ Photo Archive.

Animals at work, 'Ein Qiniya, Ramallah. Photo by David  
Landis- RIWAQ photo archive.





Children playing around a water spring, 'Ein Qiniya, Ramallah. Photo by David Landis- RIWAQ Photo Archive.

picnic area nowadays, except that, at the time, the picnics would be held on a daily basis. The leftovers were always a food source for the animals and the land. Composting and recycling were intrinsic to their way of life.

Other activities such as men's meetings were held in public plazas, mosques, and *diwans*.

In light of the above, one can conclude that while knowing that the land was the main source of food and a better life, people appreciated it and used only what they needed without exploiting it. They worked with nature rather than against it. In fact, respectful use of natural resources stimulated the

emergence of the traditional Palestinian village, which embodies the rich cultural heritage of Palestine.

*Riwaq is a local non-profit organisation that consists of a dedicated team of architects, researchers, planners, and designers, among many other professionals. Riwaq has been working since 1991 on the promotion, protection, and reuse of architectural heritage in Palestine.*

#### References

- Omar Hamdan, *Palestinian Folk Architecture*, 1996.  
Vera Tamari and Suad al-Amiry, *The Palestinian Village Home*, London, British Museum Publications Ltd., 1989.

Water Spring, Silwad, Ramallah. Photo by David Landis- RIWAQ photo archive.

