



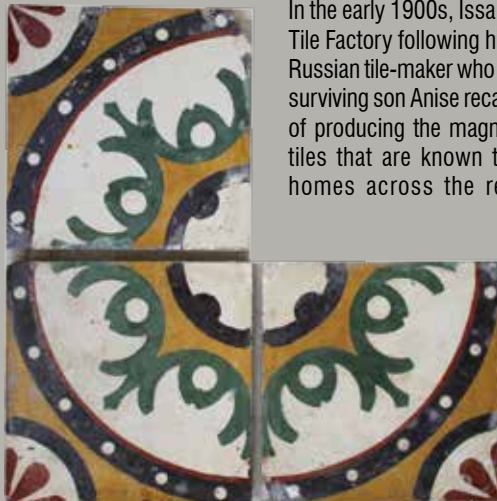
The Revival of a Jerusalem Tile Factory

By Aline Khoury



Walking through the alleyways of the Old City of Jerusalem, one inevitably stumbles upon the many treasures hidden between the city's resilient walls. As crowds of tourists and pilgrims enter New Gate and make their way through the main streets towards the city's holy sites, Al-Jawalida Street's enduring Tile-Factory building – recently renovated and revived into an art and cultural center – goes unnoticed.

In the early 1900s, Issa Khalil Kassisieh established the Tile Factory following his apprenticeship under Hoku, a Russian tile-maker who worked in Jaffa, as his youngest surviving son Anise recalls. Kassisieh mastered the craft of producing the magnificently colored and patterned tiles that are known to have decorated Palestinian homes across the region, bringing the trade to Jerusalem and expanding the tile-making tradition. With over 20 employees coming from neighboring towns and villages, the factory flourished and became one of the two primary tile factories in Palestine, with tiles reaching Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus.



Tiles that were produced in the tile factory in Jerusalem (Al Mamal).



Installation by Benji Boyadgian in Al Ma'mals Upper Gallery (Al Mamal, Oct 2014).

After being neglected for decades, a Jerusalem tile factory that dates from the 1900s was renovated and transformed into a dynamic art and cultural center by Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art. Al Ma'mal currently runs a series of artistic and creative programs in the heart of the Old City.

The factory faced challenges of industrialization as new modes of production and cheaper materials began to replace the traditional production process, yet Kassisieh endured the changes and maintained the heritage, albeit working on a smaller scale. Before Kassisieh passed away, he left the factory for his sons to manage, bidding them to "take good care of" it.* Little did he know that in 1967 the Israeli forces would occupy the city and obstruct the factory's operation. The family struggled to keep it



Inside the Tile Factory during renovation (Al Ma'mal, Nov 2011).





Al Ma'mal's entrance hall, screening of *The Goodness Regime* by Jumana Manna and Sille Storihe (Al Mamal, Oct 2014).

all industrial activity to cease inside the city walls, leaving them no choice but to close its doors in 1975.

The building was neglected for decades, left standing in ruins and accumulating waste, as the family didn't have the means to maintain the building or pay its costly taxes. To their advantage, the founders of Anadiel Gallery, the first Palestinian art gallery that was active on Salah Eddin street between 1992 and 1996, saw hope in reviving the factory and adapting it for reuse to expand its cultural activities. By 1998 plans were set as a group of artists, architects, and cultural activists established a non-profit organization, Al Ma'mal Foundation, with the purpose of promoting and facilitating the making of art while preserving the Palestinian cultural heritage in the city. In accordance with the Kassisieh family, the foundation agreed to safeguard the factory's heritage and thus adopted its Arabic name, *Al Ma'mal*, meaning "workshop" or "small factory," as it was commonly called by local inhabitants.

Al Ma'mal's dream of reviving the tile factory was soon disrupted by the rise of the Second Intifada and restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities. Available grants and funds were diverted to humanitarian aid and limited those for cultural programs. During this

time of turmoil, Al Ma'mal believed it imperative to work from within the Old City, continuing its activities in a temporary space opposite the tile factory. The foundation persevered through over 15 years of legal battles and meager means, and with the help of generous grants by various international and local organizations, Al Ma'mal was finally able to renovate the building and move into its long-awaited home in the spring of 2013.

The space has been beautifully renovated, bridging between the old and new, preserving the original stones of the structure and unfolding some of the factory's machinery in a modern open space. The ruins of the tile factory metamorphosed into a dynamic art center that brings together various members of the community through diverse and creative programs.

Al Ma'mal holds regular exhibitions that are open to the public on weekdays, presenting works of both international and Palestinian artists. This year it held solo exhibitions for Palestinian artists, including Majd Abdel Hamid and Larissa Sansour, both visual artists who question the national rhetoric from different perspectives. Hamid deconstructs national symbols visually and conceptually, exploring their meanings and our understandings of them

using such various mediums as video, painting, sculpture, and installations, while Sansour offers a futuristic outlook on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and humorously suggests a vertical solution to Palestinian statehood through a remarkably produced science fiction video, *The Nation Estate*.

During the evenings, the space transforms to accommodate various cultural events, inviting artists and cultural practitioners to present their work through discursive encounters and screening film series, as well as providing young emerging artists a platform to showcase their talents through concerts and performances. In

studio apartment hosts international artists who get the opportunity to visit and experience Jerusalem and Palestine directly, allowing them to research and create work during one- to two-month residencies. Interesting discussions and interactions arise from these exchanges as artists share their ideas and skills with the local community, sometimes through exhibitions, workshops, public talks, or other creative encounters. A recent resident artist from Colombia, Adriana Rojas, held a cinematic workshop that resulted in a magnificent performance of image projections on a constructed dome inside the space, allowing participants



'The Recover of an Early Water' Installation by Hera Buyuktasciyan at the Patriarchs Pool, Jerusalem Show VII (Al Mamal, Oct 2014).

the backdrop of the city's surreal political reality, with the sounds of church bells and the muezzin prayers, Al Ma'mal has stirred the city's soundscape with Palestinian rock bands such as *El Container*, and on other occasions hosted classical and oriental ensembles, attracting a diverse audience across different age groups.

Throughout the year Al Ma'mal's spacious

to enrich their artistic skills and explore their family stories and histories. The performance gathered the participants, families, friends, and neighbors in this enjoyable evening.

Al Ma'mal is further extending its educational activities by providing young adults with opportunities to develop their talents and skills through professional



On Al Ma'mal rooftop, young adults participate in a painting course (Al Ma'mal, March 2015).

training courses that prepare participants to successfully integrate the arts in various work fields. These courses, which have included filmmaking, photography, painting, and drawing, are held in Al Ma'mal's multi-purpose workshop space during the evening hours.

What has distinguished Al Ma'mal's activities over the years is undoubtedly the Jerusalem Show, a unique art and cultural festival that takes over various sites and spaces across the Old City. First initiated in 2007, the Show invites over 20 Palestinian and international

artists to exhibit and participate in this exhibition that includes a comprehensive program of events throughout a two-week period. Currently part of the Qalandiya International Biennale, the seventh edition (October 2014) titled *Fractures*, explored the different realities and perceptions of life in Jerusalem through diverse artistic interventions in over 12 venues. The Jerusalem Show opens historic sites and spaces that are generally closed or unknown to the public, providing its audience an enchanting experience of discovering the city's history and cultural

El Container performing at Al Mamal.



Cinematic Workshop with Colombian artist Adriana Rojas.

heritage through artistic engagements. This year the public was able to visit Hamam Sitna Mariam (The Virgin Mary's Bathhouse) located just inside Lion's Gate, accessed to the public for the first time in 30 years, as well as the Patriarch's Pool, which is hidden between residential compounds in the Christian Quarter. In this manner Al Ma'mal extends its activities beyond the walls of the Tile Factory, never ceasing to surprise those who want to explore the city's rich cultural heritage.

When asked why they chose the image of the goat as their logo, the directors of Al Ma'mal explained how it is symbolic of steadfastness in tough conditions, which has proven to be truly significant for the identity of the Tile Factory and the foundation. The legacy of the traditional

Tile Factory continues to live on as it bustles with life, laughter, and energy, becoming a community place for everyone to enjoy and learn about contemporary art and cultural practices.

For further information about Al Ma'mal's programs and activities, visit our Facebook page or website: www.almamalfoundation.org.

*Taken from an interview with Anise Kasssieh.

Aline Khoury is an art and cultural enthusiast who currently coordinates art education programs at Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem.

Photos courtesy of Al Ma'mal Foundation.

Our Readers Say ...

Our current cultural situation generally reflects our economic, political, and social status. Therefore, our culture today reflects the decline that we are, and have been, experiencing for years. That doesn't mean we are losing our heritage or our traditions; it means that we are not participating in the world's culture through media and other means as much as we could be, if we were not under occupation.

M. H., Al-Bireh