



IN THE
LIMELIGHT

PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH



Shadia Yousef Touqan

My Right of Return

Palestinian old cities are in danger of disappearing. In some cases, their buildings suffer from neglect, often due to a lack of funds. In other cases, they are usurped by the occupation. Dr. Shadia Touqan has been among the pioneers in working to reverse this trend and preserve and keep alive this important element of our Palestinian heritage.

Shadia Touqan was raised in Kuwait by parents who kept alive the connection to their roots through frequent visits and, as she asserts, “a very Palestinian and (inevitably) Nabulsi home.... Poetry and literature were always the spice of our family life.” Her father Yousef Touqan, an engineer (brother of the poets Ibrahim and Fadwa), encouraged her to pursue her interest in art and architecture from an early age, although it was not a usual career for a woman back in the 1960s. The 1967 war broke out when Touqan was an undergraduate student at Cairo University’s School of Architecture. Subsequently, Touqan was no longer able to visit her hometown or to obtain the “ID.”

In 1973, Touqan moved to England, where she worked and continued her post-graduate studies. Like most diaspora Palestinians, she suffered from being exiled from her homeland. In 1992,

feeling the strong urge to contribute to the cause of her country – in an academic context and notwithstanding her “narrow professional perspective” – Touqan enrolled in the PhD program at University College London (UCL), Bartlett School of Architecture, at the Development Planning Unit. Her aim was to research the impact of the prolonged Israeli military occupation on urban development of Palestinian towns, with Nablus as a case study. It was research and field work in Nablus and other cities that brought Touqan back to Palestine. Visiting for the first time since the occupation, during the last years of the first Intifada, Touqan received what she calls her “best ‘education’ about [her] people, their incredible resilience and perseverance in the face of the cruel realities of their lives.”

The project was not an easy one. Data collection was particularly challenging. Since there was not enough literature available, most of Touqan’s research was based on primary sources such as interviews, meetings, and written and physical surveys that had to be cross-checked and corroborated. As a Palestinian researcher, she had to make sure that her evidence was verified.

Touqan is grateful for the very supportive and understanding professors at her college who provided her with the required professional advice throughout her studies. But she did not anticipate that her research would allow her to live and work back home in Palestine where she would finally be able to “start paying some of my dues to my country and community.”

In the aftermath of the signing of the Oslo Agreement, Touqan was approached by a number of international organizations interested in learning more about the development needs in Palestine. Starting in 1995, after she had obtained her PhD, Touqan worked as an adviser to a number of these organizations. In 1997, while working with UNESCO on the preparation of the Bethlehem 2000 Rehabilitation Plan, she was approached by the board of trustees of the Welfare Association with the request to take over as director of the Old City of Jerusalem Revitalisation Programme (OCJRP).

Touqan held this position until 2014. Under her leadership, the activities of the comprehensive revitalization program included the restoration and rehabilitation of historic buildings and monuments for institutional use, housing renewal, training and capacity building for professionals and practitioners in conservation, a community outreach program, and documentation and publications. In 2004, OCJRP won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture; Touqan shared in this award for her role as the *Person Responsible* for implementing the program. In 2006, the program was expanded to replicate the original Jerusalem program in the Old City of Nablus. For both the Old City of Jerusalem and the Old City of Nablus, Touqan coordinated the preparation of comprehensive databases based on thorough surveys for all buildings and

monuments. Both databases are on a GIS system.

In 2007, under Touqan’s leadership, the Institute for Architectural Heritage Preservation was established in Jerusalem, in partnership with UNESCO and funded by the European Union. UNESCO’s International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage (ICCROM) developed its training curriculum, which is carried out in the old cities of both Jerusalem and Nablus. The project is ongoing, with further funding from the Arab Fund and the European Union.

Touqan asserts her sincere conviction that she received her best education through working with the Palestinian communities and considers it a privilege and honor to have been able to work and live in Al Quds and Palestine for seventeen years. “I was able to stake my claim for my Right of Return. I must be blessed.”

Touqan’s choices and accomplishments include a number of firsts: in 1969, she was the first Palestinian woman to receive a bachelor’s degree in architecture from the Faculty of Engineering, School of Architecture at Cairo University. In 1970, she became the second female member of Jordan’s Engineers Association.

When asked if her gender placed hurdles in her life and work, she explained that “in all stages of my studies, I was continuously supported and encouraged by my father and brothers as well as male relatives and colleagues in different countries and from different backgrounds and cultures... It may have been considered a challenge to study architecture in the 1960s and practice it in the 1970s and 1980s, but being a woman was not an obstacle to the progress and development of my career!”