

NABLUS HISTORIC CENTRE CULTURAL HERITAGE : SAFEGUARDING CULTURAL IDENTITY UNDER OCCUPATION



HUMAN RIGHTS **COMMUNITY** RESILIENCE
ATTRACTIVENESS PEACE **REGENERATION**
WELL-BEING **CONSERVATION** **HERITAGE** HISTORY

1. Context

The city of Nablus, the economic capital of Palestine, is a city of Canaanite origin which was established by the Arab Canaanites (Hawyouns) in 4200 B.C. The original early settlement, known as Tell Balata and identified as Schechem, located at the east of the historic center, was occupied and destroyed by the Romans in 67 B.C. It was then rebuilt as the city of "Flavia Nyapols", which later became Nablus.

The historic center of Nablus has a great artistic and historical value, as it was built and rebuilt over centuries, and contains ruins from the Roman period to the Byzantine and Ottoman periods, until the 20th century. Now 40% deserted, it consists of a compact fabric of buildings with narrow, vaulted



arches, public spaces with oriental features, and more than 100 architectural historical monuments (ancient soap factories, Turkish bathes, historic palaces, water springs, churches, mosques, khans, historic gardens, etc.)

It suffered harshly from the Israeli occupation since 2002, a long period of siege, and the military bombing of more than 1 000 buildings. The siege also led to deterioration of the economic, tourism and agricultural activities of the city, and many companies and funds have flown to nearby cities. The expansion of the city was also prevented by the deployment of Israeli colonies and military sites all over mountains around Nablus. Today, with 11 000 inhabitants, the historic center is one of the most disadvantaged areas of Nablus, due to the departure of upper and educated class, segregation of the new residents, rise in illiteracy, lack of social incentives for self-improvement and high unemployment rate compared to the rest of the city.

THE MUNICIPALITY OF NABLUS TOOK THE INITIATIVE TO PRESERVE THE HISTORIC CENTRE, CONSIDERED AS AN ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY, THROUGH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A UNIT SPECIALIZING IN THE RESTORATION OF THE OLD CITY, AND THE GRANTING OF A SPECIFIC LAND-USE CLASSIFICATION FOR THE AREA.

2. Nablus and culture

The old city of Nablus (also called “The Open Museum”), has been severely destroyed and military targeted several times, part of the destruction of Palestinian heritage that occurred over the past decade due to the Israeli occupation. Located on the west bank of the Jordan River, far from the main tourist line, it has been vulnerable to destruction over long periods of time, raising the topic of preserving heritage under military occupation as an utmost necessity and a form of national resistance for safeguarding the country’s identity.



When the Oslo peace agreement was signed in occupied Palestine in 1995, Palestinian Authority institutions were established in the city of Nablus. At that time, it was accompanied by cultural development aimed at solving chronic problems related to population growth, traffic problems, weak infrastructure and difficult social situations, and preservation policies led by the city of Nablus. These policies aligned with the principles of the young Ministry of Tourism which adopted cultural heritage as a major element for sustainable development, in partnership with the local communities, and registered 60 000 traditional buildings, 2 000 archaeological sites and 5 000 archaeological features.

To respond to the urgent need of rehabilitation of the area, the Municipality established milestone projects, mainly funded from grants, to preserve the remnants of the ancient Arab city and the Roman and Byzantine archaeological assets, and to merge the city main commercial centre with the adjacent historical centre. Beyond the preservation and rehabilitation of the area, this contributed to revitalizing the local tourism sector.

3. Goals and project implementation

1.1. Main aim and specific goals

The main goal is to reach a sustainable model of preservation and development of the historic core of Nablus, which has the potential to become a cultural, social and commercial centre in Palestine.

In this sense, this project aims at engaging the citizens (at their own expense) in the maintenance and preservation of this heritage (under the supervision of the Municipality), to reduce the reliance on external funding and grants.

Another objective is to stop the migratory flows leaving the city centre, to upgrade the urban environment into a safe and equal place, and to find balance between preserving history and responding to people's needs of contemporary life.



1.2. Development of the project

Main actions carried out

The city preservation plan is based on a long-term political, economic and architectural vision to develop the historic centre, formulated as such: "The revival and development of old Nablus in social, economic, and cultural sectors, the preservation of its urban heritage, the upgrading of its services in a safe and diverse society, to return to old Nablus its status, with the participation of all parts of society".

DESPITE THE DEMOLITION AND DESTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL BUILDINGS AND THE LOSS OF A LARGE PROPORTION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL FABRIC OF THE OLD TOWN, THE HISTORICAL CENTRE OF NABLUS SAFEGUARDED A GREAT ARTISTIC AND HISTORICAL VALUE, AND WAS INCLUDED IN THE TENTATIVE UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE LIST.

The plan was developed based on the identification of local needs, obtained through an inventory of the ancient architectural heritage:

- Preserving the old city's urban heritage and protecting monuments to ensure their sustainability;
- Upgrading the urban environment;
- Improving the residents' and visitors' living conditions;
- Providing infrastructure and services to attract economic activities;
- Restoring the centrality of the old city through social, economic and cultural development;
- Implementing the protection systems and laws related to world heritage to preserve and revive the old city, and restoring buildings according to international technical standards;
- Promoting awareness and community participation in the process;
- Find balance between modernity requirements and authenticity through integration and regeneration of cultural heritage (tangible and intangible);
- Improving the quality of housing to encourage people from various backgrounds to come live in the centre and boost investment;
- Developing existing commercial activities and traditional handicrafts;
- Preserving cultural heritage as a source of knowledge and tourism development.



The proposed revival plan also follows general rules and principles applied to preserve historic cities:

- Preserve the distinctive character of the historic city and urban heritage context;
- Learn from international experiences in terms of restoring historical cities and adapt them accordingly;
- Adapt the development plans to the historical value of the surroundings;
- Adopt a holistic view of the old town encompassing all rehabilitation sectors, ensuring that preservation projects will improve social and economic conditions, and are distributed in a fair and equal manner;
- Define a dedicated "working committee" composed of all relevant stakeholders including specialists, government institution, universities, civil society, organizations, chamber of commerce and private sector, to ensure the successful cross-cutting integration of the plan.
- Raise awareness among the local community regarding the importance of preserving the historical heritage and encouraging public participation through the implementation of the preservation master plan.

On the ground, this translated in the following rehabilitation projects:

- Regeneration of nine clusters of historic houses (Hosh) hosting more than 100 disadvantaged families.
- Secure 84 sites with ancient facades from collapsing.
- Rehabilitate 20 % of infrastructure networks and road stone tiles.
- 8 on-going project of upgrading public spaces within the old town, including the rehabilitation of the Central Square's clock tower.
- Acquisition and renovation of five heritage buildings in partnership with community institutions.
- Implementation of Khan Al-Wakah project as the first traditional hotel in the old town.
- Raise public awareness about heritage and conservation laws.
- Restoration of the traditional bazaar (clothing market), among other on-going market rehabilitation studies.



- Inventory of 100 architectural and historical heritage sites.
- Renovation of several destroyed residential compounds, and return of former residents.

The partners of Nablus municipality include Nablus Governorate, Najah University, the Ministry of tourism and antiquities, Civil Society of Nablus (NGO), and the NGO Taawon.

Main obstacles encountered by the municipality include the absence of legislation and regulations that would oblige institutions and individuals to preserve the urban heritage and responds to the current needs of Palestinian society, and the lack of public awareness towards heritage, in particular regarding investors, who still consider heritage as a source of threat and inconvenience.

4. Impacts

1.1. Direct impacts

Impacts on the local government

The listing of Palestinian heritage sites on the World Heritage List following the acceptance of Palestine as a full member of UNESCO, had a great impact on the Palestinian government awareness that their heritage is one of the most important tool in their possession to liberate their homeland, and since then it has become more actively involved in this sense.

Impact on culture and on local cultural actors

This project strengthened the relationship of the old town residents with their homes, and increased their affiliation to their traditional dwellings that reflect the culture they belong to. It also increased citizens' confidence in the potential of their heritage, and now the community mobilises more often against the demolition of ancient buildings.



The most disadvantaged population of the old town are feeling more considered after a long period of marginalization, as their town and old houses, considered as architectural masterpieces, have become a tourism destination and source of pride.

Impact on the territory and population

Rehabilitation projects related to heritage in the old town have become an attraction point for visitors from other Palestinian cities and from abroad. These concrete results have encouraged citizens to undertake the necessary maintenance work at their own expense, which is crucial to achieve sustainability and not to rely exclusively on external grants.

1.2. Evaluation

Work is being done at the moment to update data about the ratio of inhabited and abandoned houses within each residential complex (hosh), as well as to monitor and update data regarding the profile and socio-economic situation of new tenants, types of new shops, and the opening and closing of tourist's facilities .

1.3. Key factors

- The involvement and participation of experts from the city in the drafting of the master plan, together with international donors, made it responsive to local requirements and special conditions. It also allowed to achieve a balance between responding to inhabitants' contemporary needs, ensuring the place's vitality, and preserving the heritage environment.
- The participation of various governmental, non-governmental organizations and the private sector brought a fresh perspective and vision on cultural heritage, enriched proposals, expanded knowledge, and provided an incentive for people to get committed in protection and preservation.
- In-depth study of the social, physical and cultural specificities of the old town enabled the fair distribution of projects across the old town to ensure social justice.



1.4. Continuity

At the moment, 9 residential clusters out of 123 have been rehabilitated.

Our master plan includes planned projects for rehabilitation in different sectors up to the year 2027, depending on the availability of external funding (current projects are funded by grants from different countries through Taawon Association).

In the near future we're looking forward to implementing, in cooperation with UNESCO, public spaces rehabilitation project inside the historic centre, stopped due to the lack of funding. Several other projects would be necessary to consolidate and maintain dangerous public elevations and buildings, and thousands of applications from the residents of the old town are submitted to the municipality in this sense.

5. Further information

Nablus was a candidate for the third "UCLG Mexico City – Culture 21 International Award" (November 2017 – May 2018). The jury for the award drew up its final report in June of 2016, and requested that the Committee on Culture promote this project as one of the good practices to be implemented through Agenda 21 for culture.

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