



By Malak Hasan

# The Lives of West Jerusalem's Palestinians Etched in Architecture



Ahlan Palestine

For the majority of Palestinians who live in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the city of Jerusalem is one of the most difficult places to visit. Until very recently, Bisan and I had never had the chance or the permission to visit the city even though we live less than half an hour away.

When we were finally able to go to Jerusalem, we headed first to its most famous spot, the Old City. When Palestinians and internationals think of Jerusalem, they usually think of its majestic gates and walls. We marvel at its ancient and narrow alleys as the sound of the mosques' *athan* and the church bells divinely intertwine. Whether you are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or someone who could not care less about religion, the Old City's Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Dome of the Rock are often the highlight of your visit, whether for their religious significance or picturesque architecture.

Politically, the status of Jerusalem remains a central issue in the dispute between Palestinians and Israelis, but the international community just assumes that the western part of Jerusalem is for Israel and the eastern part for Palestine. But it's not as simple as that, is it? If East Jerusalem has its holy sites, the Old City, and Palestinian neighborhoods, then what is the story of West Jerusalem? Because Ahlan Palestine is a travel blog, our first attempt to discover this story was to Google the top tourist attractions in West Jerusalem. The websites that acknowledge the divided status recommend that we visit a museum, an aquarium, a zoo, a horse ranch, and a library. The Israeli websites that present Jerusalem as an undivided Israeli city include the Old City and sites found in East Jerusalem. Again, we were left wondering about the story of West Jerusalem.

This thought process led us to Ghadeer Najjar, a Palestinian architect who is passionate about the history of Palestinian cities captured by Israeli

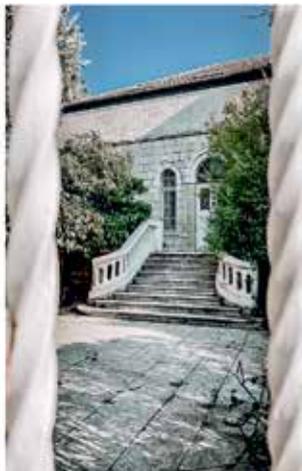


Malak, Ghadeer, and Bisan posing in front of the Hansen Hospital where Tawfiq Canaan worked.

Zionist militias in 1948, before Israel's founding. Ghadeer published a guide called *Bethlehem: The Historic Center and Bethlehemites in Jerusalem*, in which she maps the neighborhoods of West Jerusalem and the lives of its Palestinian population. She also helps travelers visit some of the most important buildings in West Jerusalem.



One of the homes at the Salameh roundabout in Talbieh.



The Kittaneh home at the Salameh roundabout.



Another home in Talbieh.



The Elias Jallat Villa in Talbieh.



Ghadeer is interested in the neighborhoods of West Jerusalem not only because they serve as witnesses to an extensive Palestinian history and presence, but also to prove that Palestinians were not just living in small stone houses. What we now refer to as West Jerusalem was a modern cosmopolitan city with the most mesmerizing architectural villas, buildings, and apartments owned by the affluent and intellectual Palestinian population.

We wanted to learn more about the history of West Jerusalem, but we found little information online.

Those who walk its streets are either blissfully unaware or actively trying to hide its history. But for Ghadeer, the answer lies in the city's unique architecture. She enthusiastically told us, "We learn about West Jerusalem through its buildings, terraces, and gardens."

On the day of the tour, Bisan and I had mixed feelings of excitement and nervousness. How do we learn about a city through its architecture if we've never studied architecture? And this is why Ghadeer was the perfect

companion to take us on this journey. As an architect herself, she has the eye, knowledge, and ability to paint a picture of how Palestinians lived in these Jerusalem neighborhoods through the simplest elements of architecture, such as the doors, the windows, the gardens, and the old rooftops.

We visited three neighborhoods that were populated by Palestinians before their mass expulsion in 1948, known as the *Nakba*. The neighborhoods are Talbīyeh, Qatamon, and Baq'a. They still have their Arabic names but not their Palestinian Arab families.

We started the tour in Talbīyeh at a roundabout known as Salameh, in reference to the late Palestinian businessman Constantine Salameh and his beautiful villa. We were not able to enter this villa that had been, for decades, the residence of the consul general of Belgium. We stood outside and learned about this family's history as the jasmine tree peeking through the villa's metal fence attempted to offer its sweet fragrance to counter the bitterness of loss.

As we stood there, a group of tourists accompanied by an Israeli tour guide approached the villa and proceeded to hear an alternative story. A blue plaque that was hung by the Israeli Jerusalem Municipality next to the villa's gate describes the owner as a Lebanese businessman, erasing any mention of his roots and the villa's identity. Across from Villa Salameh, we stood at the gate of yet another villa with another plaque that says Villa Kittaneh, named after its Palestinian owners. The only detail that we found about the owners' true identity was that they were Latin Christians.

Ghadeer said that many of the Palestinian homes in these neighborhoods were built by foreign architects who were commissioned by wealthy Palestinian families. They were businesspeople, merchants, and intellectuals who had a taste for fine art and an international architectural vision. This is one of the reasons that these homes combined international and European architectural elements that celebrate the work of Bethlehem and Beit Jala's professional stonemasons.

We walked farther down the street, among more homes, while Ghadeer explained the architectural styles in relation to their past owners who were forced to flee, fearing for their lives and leaving behind amazing homes that are now occupied by Israeli families. One of these grand structures is the picturesque Yasmin House. This house was built by the Canaan family and named after and run by Dr. Tawfiq Canaan's daughter Yasmin. It served as a guesthouse that was frequently rented by Palestinian families looking to spend the summer in Jerusalem.

The house is a unique example of the mix between Palestinian and European architectural styles as it uses Palestinian stone to build what looks like a Gothic medieval castle with different focal points, such as a tower and a dome. This house not only demonstrates the diversity in landscape and architecture but also the social and economic status of the Palestinian families who built these homes and lived in these neighborhoods.



The Hanna Bisharat villa.



Yasmin House.



Villa Constantine Salameh.



The villas of the Oweidah brothers.

Very close to Yasmin House is a very famous house that was built by Hanna Bisharat. Even though the house is currently occupied by Israeli families, one can still make out the faint engraved words on its front wall: Villa Haroun Al Rashid. Ghadeer said that the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir requested that the words be scrubbed off the house when she moved in.

We also visited the villas of the Oweidah brothers in the Baq'a neighborhood, which were stolen in 1948 and have been used by several organizations since that time. The houses have spacious gardens and terraces decorated with huge arcs, a recurring feature that can be seen in many homes built and owned by Palestinian families.

When you walk the streets of West Jerusalem, you can see the influence that this part of the city had on prominent Palestinian authors and intellectuals such as Khalil al-Sakakini, Edward Said, and Ghada Karmi. You start to imagine the

laughter of children as they played in the gardens. The chatter of Palestinian women sitting on their balconies eating the citrus fruit freshly picked from their front yards. And you feel the overwhelming sorrow and horror they must have felt when they had to leave their homes behind forever.

This one-day trip was definitely not enough to hear all the stories of the Palestinian population of West Jerusalem, but it was a great start to a better understanding of the complexity and rich history of this place. We highly recommend that you read more about the history of West Jerusalem and find a Palestinian expert to show you the place through a new lens.

*Malak and Bisan are the founders of Ahlan Palestine, a travel blog that promotes tourism in Palestine. You can follow their tour in West Jerusalem and hear more stories about its history if you visit their Instagram page @AhlanPalestine.*



The Hanna Bisharat house.



Hansen Hospital.



The Elias Jallat house.