

Dar al-Consul

From Ancient Ruins to a Modern Palestinian Youth Hub



By Amjad Kanaan Taweel

In 1856, the Prussians purchased a large historical building on Aqabat al-Takiyyeh, east of Souk Khan az-Zeit in the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, to serve as a Prussian consulate and residence

for the consul. Henceforth, the building was named Dar al-Consul, the House of the [Prussian] Consul, a name that has been retained in oral tradition until today. Part of the building's upper floors served as the consul's domicile, while the rest was used as a political and cultural center for Prussian activities that for around three decades were major attractions in the Old City. In 1882, the property was transferred to the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

Local archeologists assume that the building of Dar al-Consul might have been built on the foundations of Roman and Byzantine structures located to the east of the *Cardo Maximus*, constructed by Emperor Hadrian as the main colonnade street of *Aelia Capitolina* between 132 and 135 AD.

In 2014, the European Union began to support the rehabilitation of the Dar al-Consul complex – now belonging to the Franciscan Custody of the Holy

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Land – through the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), initiating eight years and three continuous phases of engagement in the Old City at the cost of EUR 4.23 million. The first phase centered on the ground floor that once covered 750 square meters. It was filled with tons of debris – very hazardous in many instances – housing many unstable, spontaneous, and dangerous structural beams and columns that were supposedly protecting the residents and neighbors of Dar al-Consul. After undergoing structural interventions and consolidations, and the unearthing of hidden rooms, passages, and niches along the way, the ground space reached 1,200 square meters. Simultaneously, 23 residential units and three community courtyards in the upper floors were fully rehabilitated and renovated.

In the project's second phase, thirteen residential units were renovated, which allowed more families to enjoy modern amenities within the ancient structures in which they live. Most of the residences suffered from humidity, hazardous tiling and electrical and mechanical installations, worn-out carpentry structures, and dangerous aluminum and plumbing fixtures. The rehabilitation of the last two remaining community courtyards included landscaping and the installation of safety guards, as some courtyards are located directly above Khan az-Zeit Street. This phase also provided opportunities for over forty undergraduate and graduate students from Al-Quds University who engaged in the rehabilitation works and operational components in the form of on-the-job-training and capacity development, carried out in cooperation with and under the supervision of their specialized academic departments.

■ Photos from the gallery space of Dar al-Consul community and civic center. Photo by Atta Aweisat.

■ Photo courtesy of PGPO|CTS.





■ Steel work preparation in the western part of the complex. © UN.Habitat, arch. Hanin Namdari.

The third and final phase concluded the excavation and preservation of archeological treasures. Five main findings are now on display on site, giving life to ruins such as cisterns, mosaic floors, and private bath and water channels from the Roman, Byzantine, Late Islamic, and Mamluk times. In addition to laying themed

■ Sectional view of the complex that shows the layering of several functions, the community and civic center, the residential units, and the open spaces. © UN-Habitat, arch. Hanin Namdari.

tiles, painting carpentry details, and installing iron, glass, and electrical and mechanical fixtures, this phase fully completed works on the ground floor by establishing unique modern eco-friendly systems and a simple but tranquilizing interior finish, offering the visitor an escape from the usual hustle and bustle of Jerusalem's Old City. Works included the installation of a firefighting system behind the stone vaults, an underfloor heating system and a geoplast layer to uplift the tiles, allowing for proper ventilation; a SMART electrical control system and unique pointing and plastering techniques were used in the rehabilitation to minimize humidity and make this location one of a kind.

In the second half of 2021, a local team began its operational execution to establish three interconnected operational spheres, namely, the Tourism, IT and Media Center (TIME), the Education and Professional Innovation Center (EPIC), and the Culinary and Food Experience (CAFÉ), designed specifically for Dar al-Consul to provide opportunities for unique learning, coaching, and practical output that serves the Old City's future aspirations. In the first three months of operation, more than 1,000 people benefited from Dar al-Consul



■ Food and culinary training session. Photo by Atta Aweisat.



■ Digital marketing lecture held by B-CITE, Al Quds University.



■ Engineers visiting the site. Courtesy of Child Center, Al Quds University.





■ Inauguration event, November 9, 2021.
© European Union, photo by Atta Jaber.

community and civic services: TIME has served approximately 250 beneficiaries, most of them children, primarily by showcasing virtual reality and augmented reality products and experiences developed for Dar al-Consul and the Old City. In cooperation with UN-Habitat, this component was co-led through the private-sector company Intertech. EPIC has served approximately 650 beneficiaries – mostly youth – primarily through training sessions and workshops related to career guidance, digital marketing, and social entrepreneurship as well as a STEAMⁱ summer camp. This component was co-led by B-CITE of Al-Quds University. CAFÉ has

“The historic sites in Palestine are not only important for their cultural and heritage values – some of which already designated as World Heritage – but also for their promising social and economic potential. Therefore, the EU invested in the rehabilitation of the Dar al-Consul Complex to become an educational, technological, and community hub [...] such projects are key to preserve the Palestinian identity of the city.”

EU Representative Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff.ⁱⁱ

allowed eight young chefs to gain practical experience through 20 training sessions that were headed by a renowned local chef specialized in Palestinian cuisine who, after the training, engaged them in preparing and serving eight events. Thus, it served another approximately 150 beneficiaries, mostly rehabilitation site laborers, a home for elderly persons, and an orphanage. In addition, it provided full meals during TIME and EPIC training sessions and catered the inauguration event of Dar al-Consul that was co-led by Custody chef Tony Zarour.

In November 2021, the site was inaugurated by the project partners, namely the European Union, UN-Habitat, the Custody of the Holy Land, and Al-Quds University, giving a festive handover of the site to the Custody and placing the project on the global radar. This emphasized the vision and mission of Dar al-Consul, which include functions that embrace the building’s raw beauty and render



■ The long side of a sarcophagus chest with relief decoration, from the Imperial Roman age. The item is broken into two blocks, one of which is missing. Photo courtesy of Intertech.

it a hub of modern usage and value for the Old City, a base to celebrate Palestinian culture. Established as an economically viable operation, the center engages an operations team that demonstrates leadership and contributes to youth knowledge and entrepreneurship while striving to become a leading civic center that engages globally – by aiming to attract new partners, visitors, know-how, and ideas – to enhance its local impact and social embeddedness.

In addition to the formalities of cutting a ribbon, unveiling the project plaque, viewing the site’s virtual and physical components, and holding formal speeches, an ancient Jerusalem olive tree was planted indoors on the ground floor, underneath one of the skylights. The plaques were made of recycled or reused olive wood. The olive tree symbolizes the humanitarian values of peace, friendship, and victory; and to local Palestinian symbolism we add the steadfastness and commitment to the land and



■ Virtual reality activities held during the operational phase of the project. Photo courtesy of Intertech.

its people – represented by Dar al-Consul’s illustrious past and promising future.

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Sample xR experiences as created by the Dar al-Consul Project, via partnership between the private sector and academia/student engagements.



ⁱ Science, technology, engineering, art, and math.

ⁱⁱ EU press release, “Old City of Jerusalem: The European Union and UN-Habitat inaugurate the newly rehabilitated Dar Al-Consul Complex,” November 12, 2021, available at https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/palestine-occupied-palestinian-territory-west-bank-and-gaza-strip/107142/old-city-jerusalem-european-union-and-un-habitat-inaugurate-newly-rehabilitated-dar-al-consul_en.