



# The Arafat Soap Factory



By Naseer Arafat

**B**uilt between 1880 and 1918, the Arafat Soap Factory is located in the midst of the old city of Nablus, near Al-Hanbali Mosque. It is part of a huge compound that includes the house of Sheikh Amr Arafat and its *diwan* (reception hall and guest courtyard), in addition to the soap factory. These buildings lie within a *hosh* (a private residential compound) and are arranged around three huge courtyards.

The Arafat family, the traditional owners of this *hosh*, is one of the indigenous families of Nablus. Its distinctive houses marvelously display the characteristic features of traditional architecture in the old city of Nablus. The inner yards



The courtyard and soap factory's main entrance.



A workshop on ceramics by artist Nisreen Barghouthi.

contain water fountains that differ in size and proportion, depending on the use of the spaces around them: the location, the elevation above the street, and accessibility were taken into consideration to give privacy to the people who use them. Thus, through different levels of elevation, there is an internal openness possible despite the clear separation of the *haremlik* (private sphere) from the *salamlik* (semi-public sphere). All these features were considered in the specific design of this compound.

The main distinguishing features are the spaces that satisfy the social needs of the owners, represented by the *diwan*. To fulfil the economic needs, a soap factory had been built on the ground floor adjacent to the *diwan*. The soap factory was donated for public use by its owners, the artist Afaf Arafat and her sister Saba' Arafat. It was renovated in 2004 by the author of this article, and a multicultural heritage center, run by the Amr Arafat Foundation, was established in honor of the sisters' father.

Part of the 900-square-meter building has been made a museum that shows the traditional tools that were used to make soap as well as tools for other important handicrafts. It features several art and handicrafts galleries, and exhibitions are organized throughout the year. In addition to offering workshops in soap making, the center regularly hosts artist workshops, particularly ceramics workshops with artist Nisreen Barghouthi. Children, young adults, and students, as well as persons interested in art, architecture, and cultural heritage can gain knowledge through the library, which houses a small collection of books as well as a lecture hall that offers opportunities for audio-visual display. The Arafat Soap Factory center is thus a unique space for visitors who wish to learn about and experience traditional life, crafts, and architecture.

Traditional manufactured products such as olive oil soap, handwoven rugs, ceramics, and postcards of artist Afaf's paintings are available for sale. The revenues finance



A scene of a Palestinian wedding in the courtyard of Arafat Soap Factory.

the center's cultural activities. Open all working days from 8:00 to 14:00, the center also offers special guided tours of the old city of Nablus upon previous arrangement. For more information, please visit the center's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Amr-Arafat-Foundation-CHEC-223627490999597>, or contact the center by email at [arafatn24@yahoo.com](mailto:arafatn24@yahoo.com).



School children visiting the soap factory.



Artist Afaf Arafat at her exhibition back in 2012.



Soap carving is one of the entertainment activities at the center. The photo shows members of the staff of the Representative Office of the Netherlands, including the consul general.

*Naseer Arafat is an architect who has dedicated much of his life to the renovation and restoration of the traditional architecture in the old city of Nablus. He is the author of Nablus, City of Civilizations (<https://www.facebook.com/Nabluscityofcivilizations>) and Tourist Itineraries in Nablus (<https://www.facebook.com/Amr-Arafat-Foundation-CHEC-223627490999597>).*

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