



# A Tour of Rural Jerusalem

## Restoration as Cultural Infrastructure



By Dana Abbas

Almost halfway between the city of Jerusalem and the city of Ramallah lie the northern villages of Jerusalem. Over an area that stretches about 20 kilometers from east to west, they are scattered over the medium-high mountain chain of *Jibal al-Quds* (Al-Quds mountains), where the geography gradually transforms from the barren eastern slopes to the fertile lands of the western mountains. Most of these villages are as ancient as the first civilizations that appeared in Palestine. Rural Jerusalem's rich heritage encompasses innumerable archaeological and historical sites, renowned architectural monuments, and typical rural and urban buildings and constructions. Moreover, the villages' local folk heritage includes crafts, oral traditions, music, and customs, contributing to the broader national and cultural wealth.

Since 2017, Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation has worked on developing and implementing a vision that responds to the geopolitical challenges enforced by the Israeli settler colonial regime in the Jerusalem area, including separation, fragmentation, and marginalization. These efforts were manifested through a

The historic center of Jaba' village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.



The historic center of Al-Jib village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.

long-term rehabilitation project titled "The Life Jacket: The Restoration and Regeneration of Rural Jerusalem." The work that has been implemented in rural Jerusalem has so far targeted the historic centers of Jaba', Kafr 'Aqab, Qalandiya, and Al-Jib. Adopting a bottom-up approach towards the preservation of cultural heritage, Riwaq treats the northern villages as one expanded geography, calling it a cluster. Through clustering, Riwaq acknowledges the significance of each village while emphasizing the importance of historical, social, and economic interdependencies between these places in the search for their communities' common interests.

Restoration as cultural infrastructure requires thoughtful planning based on research and a deep engagement with the community, local institutions, and other stakeholders, taking into consideration both physical and nonphysical aspects. Led by this approach, the work has been structured around three main elements; the first being a series of physical interventions in the historic centers of rural Jerusalem (documentation, planning, archaeological excavations, restoration works and adaptive reuse, refurbishment of public spaces, the provision of infrastructure and landscaping, and more). The other two

soft components include a cultural program within these centers and a substantial research component that looked at the area's common histories and trajectories. Along with partners and collaborators, Riwaq is opening up this geography by organizing hikes and walks, providing accommodations and residencies, creating public and open spaces, working with those in the local communities who are willing to share their knowledge, practices, and narratives. Riwaq also makes available a multitude of archival and research materials to enable anyone to explore these historic centers and their rich cultural heritage.

In Jaba' village, 11 kilometers northeast of Jerusalem, the elegant masonry houses of its historic center can be seen when driving along Highway 60 that connects Ramallah with the southern West Bank. Being close to Qalandiya checkpoint and a stone quarry, the restoration of Jaba's historic center adopted an ecological approach to contain the disastrous environmental and geopolitical problems that the village is facing. Aside from the rich architectural heritage, the historic center embraces the remains of an ancient Roman fortress and a water system of cisterns and canals that run underground, connecting to the abandoned Roman



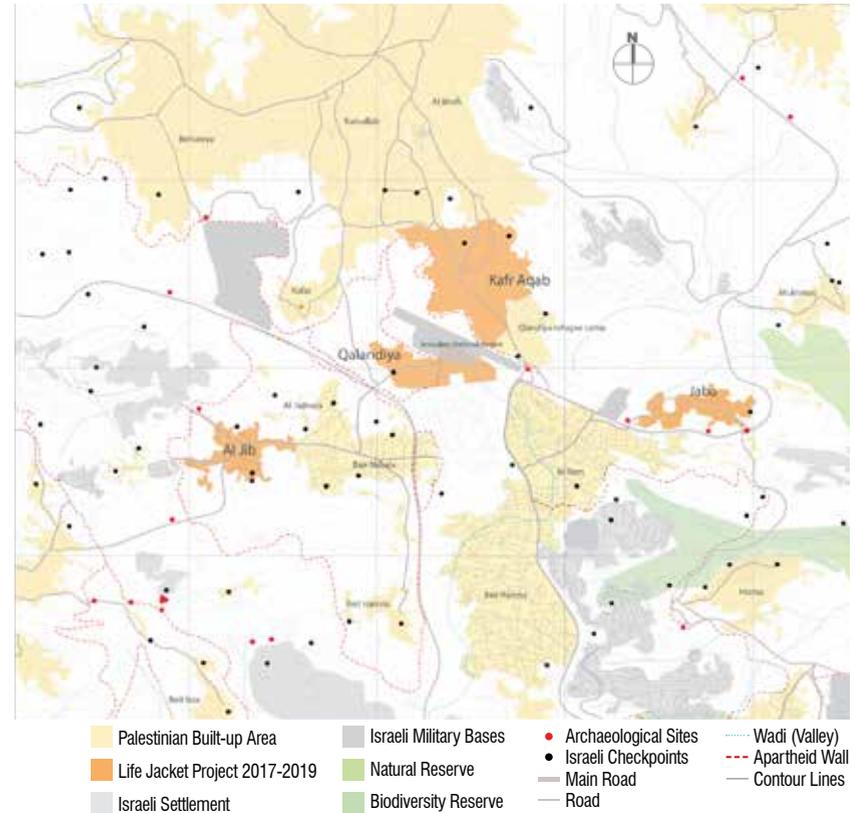
The historic center of Qalandiya village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.

pool at the eastern edge of the historic center. This system was documented and traced during the rehabilitation project and is now projected as water paths and green elements that can be seen inside the alleys of Jaba'.

The natural wadi between Jaba' and Kafr 'Aqab was once the main route connecting the two villages. In 2016, Riwaq invited artists, researchers, and locals to re-walk the wadi and draw the trail, accompanied by a local guide. Today, PYALARA (Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and

Rights Activism) has its own premises in the historic center and manages the site in cooperation with the local council. In 2016, Jaba's historic center hosted /si:n/ festival of video art and performance; it has housed many workshops and summer camps since its renovation began in 2014.

Heading west, the high-rise buildings of Kafr 'Aqab dominate the scenery. Behind this forest of concrete, at the eastern edge of the town, lies the historic center of Kafr 'Aqab. The village is located eight kilometers north



General map of "The Life Jacket Project" villages. Courtesy of Riwaq.

The courtyard of Dalia Association in Kafr 'Aqab. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.



of Jerusalem and just a five-minute drive south of Al-Bireh city center. The vision for the rehabilitation of the Kafr 'Aqab historic center aims to transform the space into a cultural and social hub. As Riwaq works in partnership with the municipality, the buildings restored so far were adapted to host effective centers and institutions, while the public spaces and courtyards bind these institutions together, forming common open spaces and a community garden that echoes *hawakir*, orchards.

The site is also rich with history: an olive press and a mill were found beneath one of the houses, and segments of a two-layered mosaic floor were found on the eastern side

of the historic center. The Old Mosque, built on the Abu Yassin Shrine, is located in the historic center. Another important landmark is *Mughara/Mughira al-Sheikh* (Shrine of Sheikh 'Abdullah), located on a hilltop on the southeastern side of the village. While only a few stones remain, the location is clearly marked by a perennial oak tree.

Today, Kafr 'Aqab is the home of Dalia Association and Seraj Library and Storytelling Center. In the near future, the Palestinian Writing Workshop, the Visual Arts Forum, the Palestinian Association for Visually Impaired Persons, Kafr 'Aqab Youth Club, and The Women's Association will occupy their newly renovated spaces.



Al-Huqqiyya Mansion in the historic center of Qalandiya village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.

What was once the courtyard of a family home will become a public playground for children. The center is already buzzing with a full program of activities held throughout the year. Dalia Association also opened its two residency spaces that allow visitors and artists to enjoy a stay at the historic center of Kafr 'Aqab. Seraj Library activates its space through a rich cultural program that revives the traditional art of storytelling through exhibitions, performances, and storytelling sessions.

Not far to the west of Kafr 'Aqab is Qalandiya village that can be seen right behind the structures of what was once the Jerusalem International Airport. To reach Qalandiya village today, one needs to go through Ramallah to the Rafat-Biddu road, an extra 20-minute ride from Kafr 'Aqab. Qalandiya's historic center is on the western side of the village lands, 10 kilometers north of Jerusalem. The village center had been buried under debris and rubble, but some 35 historic buildings were found once the restoration work started in 2017. The architectural and structural style of the buildings indicates that they were built in the Ottoman period (between the sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries). Stone fragments, column segments, mosaic stones, and scattered pottery also indicate



The trail from Jaba' to Kafr 'Aqab. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.

earlier human presence that reaches as far back as the Mamluk, Crusader, Byzantine, and perhaps even Roman eras.

An examination of oral history was a main approach in efforts to reveal the socioeconomic history of the village. Interviews with locals indicated the presence of an archaeological site locally known as *Al-Nawamis*, named after openings engraved in stone and used as burial sites that can be found there. Oral history sessions also indicated the presence of archaeological water reservoirs to the northeast of the town called *Al-Biar* (Arabic for the Well's Area), where each well has a proper name: *Al-Homma*, *Al-Etham*, *Al-Rasas*, and *Al-Natsheh*, to name some. Al-Omari Mosque at the core of the historic center is another important archaeological landmark where the ruins of some ancient structures (probably Roman) are still visible from its northern facade.

By 2018, Riwaq was able to fully restore two courtyards to serve as premises for the local women's association and Qalandiya Protection Group. In addition, Riwaq worked on the restoration of Al-Huqqiyya Mansion, a multi-story architectural landmark at the entrance of the village. The mansion serves as the premises of some cultural institutions, such as Tibaq Publishing, and accommodates a seminar and workshop space managed by Riwaq. The mansion's terraced courtyard is meant to house public events and cultural activities. Riwaq's art residency space is another asset that drives artists and creatives to experience the rich culture of the area.

In the last two years, Riwaq has heavily invested in rural Jerusalem through its cultural program. One of the most spectacular projects is a series of murals that infiltrate the alleys of Qalandiya and also transform the brutal concrete water cistern in the nearby town of Al-Jib into a colorful, enchanting work of art. Ten kilometers northwest of Jerusalem, the huge

mural covering the cistern now defines the entrance to Al-Jib's historic center and leads the way up the hill to the site of the ancient city of Gibeon. The archaeological site, locally known as *Tal al-Ras* (Hill of the Head), is a must-see destination with its grand Middle Bronze Age cylindrical pool with a large staircase, *Al-Joura* (the hollow). A Byzantine hall that was once part of the town's ancient fortifications can be found at the western edge of the historic center. Locally known as *Al-Kaneesa* (the church), this magnificent structure is another landmark worth visiting.

The historic center was renovated according to a two-fold vision: first to protect it from acts of demolition and other violations; and secondly, to look at the role of restoration in creating the infrastructure necessary to prepare the site as a tourist destination for both local and international visitors by linking the old town to the archaeological site and the surrounding neighborhoods and street networks. Today, one can enjoy a smooth walk in the alleys of Al-Jib. The municipality,

The archaeological site of Al-Nawamis near Qalandiya village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.



The archaeological landmark Al-Joura in Al-Jib village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.





Storytelling with Fida' Ataya under an oak tree in Kafr 'Aqab. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.



Riwaq's residency at Qalandiya village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.



Mural by the Italian street artist Millo in the historic center of Al-Jib village. Photo courtesy of Riwaq.

in collaboration with Al-Jib Protection Group, is making a great effort to activate *Beit al-Maqa'd* (lit. House of the Seat, traditionally the name for a village's formal guest house), a public building that is now open to welcome visitors and accommodate workshops and events at the heart of the ancient town.

Just as in its broader 50 Villages project and through its work in rural Jerusalem, Riwaq asserts that restoration work and rehabilitation processes are capable of creating the needed physical and cultural infrastructures to further support the local economy, reclaim a geography that is shaped by peasant heritage and practices, and document micro-narratives to contribute to the nation's grand history. Over the course of five years, the work has revealed the significant role that rural Jerusalem can play in the socioeconomic and politico-cultural development in the area, in particular, and in Palestine as a whole. But more collective and collaborative efforts are needed to recognize the growing political and epistemic significance of architectural heritage in local towns and villages, and to actively contribute to mainstreaming cultural heritage among the general public. One of the very first steps is to raise awareness about these areas and to visit, walk, and inhabit these spaces and landscapes. Cultural tourism can contribute to the sustainability of these sites, celebrate Palestine's rich and unique culture and heritage, and uphold the livelihood of its local communities.

*Dana Abbas is an architect and researcher at Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation and a lead architect in "The Life Jacket Project" that aims to revitalize and develop rural Jerusalem. She currently leads Riwaq's work in the villages of Al-Jib and Beit Hanina as well as several cultural projects.*

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