

## DERELICT STRUCTURES

Without memories you have no real relationship to a place.

– Mahmud Darwish

### **Al-Assi Cinema Studio:**

### **Glorious Past & Pale Present**

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Guided by modernity and openness, the fifth decade of the last century marked a turn in the course of urban development in the Palestinian city of Nablus. The year 1952, in particular, witnessed the construction of the Dawar, a main traffic node in the city center and a public space outside the Old City borders. That same year also witnessed the birth of al-Assi Cinema, which represented, together with other cinemas in the city, socio-cultural landmarks that left a footprint on the everyday life at that time. These two monuments and others were a manifestation of a new era of urban development and architecture and significantly influenced the sociocultural practices in the city.

Al-Assi Cinema was not the first cinema in Nablus; it was preceded by others. Nonetheless, its story illuminates lifestyles and architectural forms that lasted in the



city for several decades. At that time, the cinema was considered a source of inspiration for people who had no access to the outer world except through films and magazines. People mirrored what they used to see in the new films, especially imitating the lifestyles and common social practices of other cultures displayed in the films.

From its inauguration in 1952, al-Assi Cinema Studio was open to the public until it suspended its activities at the beginning of the first intifada in 1987. It was reopened in 1994 along with al-Assi Studio, a wedding hall. Later, after being shelled in 2002 during Israeli incursions in the second intifada, its doors shut again, this time for good.<sup>1</sup> It has ended up in a state of neglect and is sometimes used as a storage space, while its front yard is used as a parking lot. The dilapidated state of al-Assi Cinema reflects social and cultural transformations within a continuously changing landscape where cinema as a form of entertainment is considered to a certain extent socially inappropriate and had been replaced by other media and practices.

## Rise and Fall

Behind the city hall of Nablus, amidst the surrounding narrow streets hosting diverse shops and goods, a flâneur might gaze through a passage-like bystreet to see al-Assi Cinema Studio standing pale after having once been a hub for people's meetings and entertainment. The events that flavored this place are lost today and may be lost forever as the empty cinema building is at risk of being demolished.

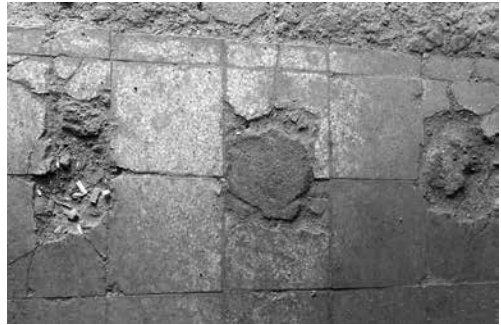
Al-Assi Cinema Studio as seen today is not only an architectural monument representing a form and style from an important era in Palestinian modern history, nor is it merely a derelict space in the center of one of the most vibrant cities in Palestine; rather, it testifies to the sociocultural lives of Palestinians who lived through the devastation of the Nakba and continued on as well as they could. Tracing the journey of the cinema since its construction reveals hidden testimonies and memories in the city in addition to perceptions produced and influenced by a materialistic capitalist and profit-seeking dogma.

The story of al-Assi Cinema begins on 26 August 1951, with the approval of a construction license for the building, followed by its actual construction in 1952. The brothers Sidqi, Abderrazaq, and Waleed al-Assi were the original owners of the cinema, which was built to accommodate six hundred seats, second in size to the Granada Cinema built one year earlier with one thousand seats. The architect Niazi Kan'an designed it with two floors, reflecting a functionalist modern design. The auditorium of the cinema contained a "balcony," an elevated level above the hall's rearmost seats. The balcony seats were larger and sold for a higher price. In addition, it contained seating called "penwar" in the rear part of the hall, dedicated for families only and separated from the rest of the hall by a handrail or a parapet to sustain some privacy. The rest of the auditorium was an open hall facing the stage where films were screened.

The cinema opened in 1952 with a screening of the Egyptian film *Fayruz Hanim* starring the Egyptian actor Anwar Wajdi and the child actress Fayruz. Daily shows

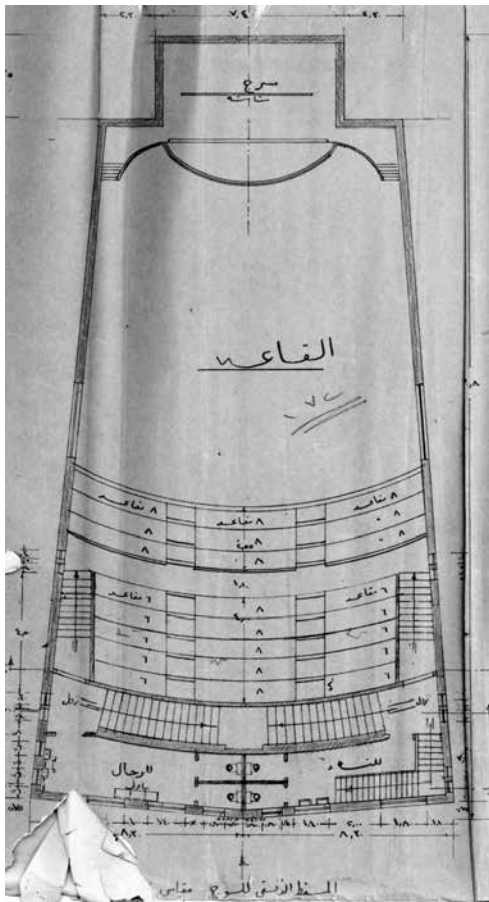
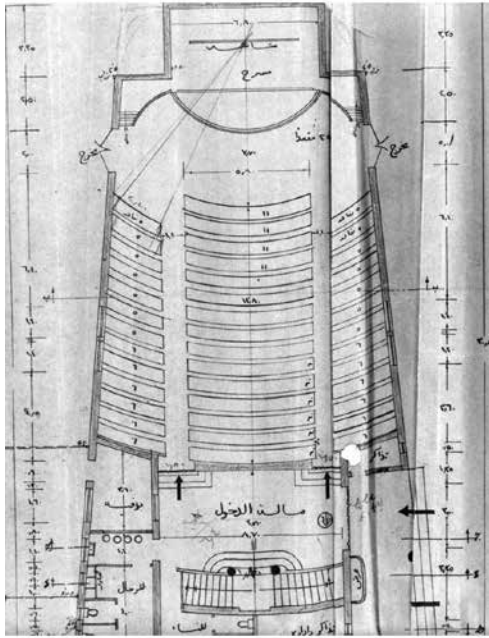
continued in the cinema during the time of Jordanian rule until 1967. Rabeeh al-Assi, an heir of one of the cinema's owners, recalls the cinema daily program:

The cinema gates used to open at 3:00 pm for people to buy tickets. In the streets outside the cinema gates, bodyguards stood to organize the entry of the audience, to secure the main entrance and to prevent undisciplined boys from flirting with girls or telling uncomfortable jokes. The two ticket offices used to sell four types of tickets, which carried the cinema's name and price. Each type was linked to the seat position in the auditorium. The balcony ticket was the most expensive, costing 12 *qirsh* [piasters], and was dedicated for the elite audience, including women from rich families. The second, cheaper, ticket was for the penwar area, which included only eight seats dedicated to families and cost 7.5 *qirsh*, while the third was the public ticket mainly dedicated to men and male youths and costing 5 *qirsh*. The last type of ticket was for children and cost 2.5 *qirsh* or was free of charge depending on the view of the controller, who could accept kids' requests to watch the film by laying down on the stage and looking up at the screen, achieving their dream of watching the new film.



Figures 1 and 2. Floor tiles at al-Assi Cinema. Photos by the authors.

The interior space of the cinema was simple, reflecting the taste of the time period in terms of color and design. Special attention was given to the upholstery of the balcony seats, which cost 45 Jordanian dinars, while that of the penwar and the hall cost 23 Jordanian dinars; all were beige in color. However, the cost of the more expensive seats did not prevent damage being done to them by angry patrons, when quarrels broke out for silly reasons during the show or when they did not like the film. The cinema floor was tiled



Figures 3 and 4. Al-Assi Cinema ground floor (left) and first floor (right) plans.

with a terrazzo tile (see figures 1 and 2); it was not carpeted, as people threw seed shells on the floor while watching the films and carpet would have been more difficult to clean. A different color of tile was used on the stairs that led to the balcony to indicate the area for privileged tickets. Beige acoustics panels were installed on the cinema's interior walls to provide a comfortable ambience for the audience.

The cinema's exterior, on the other hand, is exemplary of modern techniques and methods of construction at the time. The main façade, which is the aesthetically distinguishing feature of the cinema's exterior, was designed with simple lines and openings while the entrance, located on the corner of the building, was formed by a recess in the ground floor and supported by four concrete columns. The walls were stone-clad, and stone decorating elements were installed around the windows of the cylindrical staircase. The blueprints of the cinema (figures 3 and 4) reflect its functional form in addition to the use of new technologies of that period, such as the skeleton of the cinema's roof made of a simple steel structure covered with asbestos sheets.

In 1958, six years after the construction of the cinema, the owners decided to add a wedding hall (al-Assi Studio) to the cinema. The addition was attached to the cinema's eastern façade; it was made of concrete walls with rough plaster exterior coating. The architecture of the studio was not very impressive, but it functioned well as a wedding hall and many ceremonies took place there. A wedding or engagement party in al-Assi Studio was considered prestigious: mention of this location was enough to show one's elegance. The interior of the studio was renovated once,

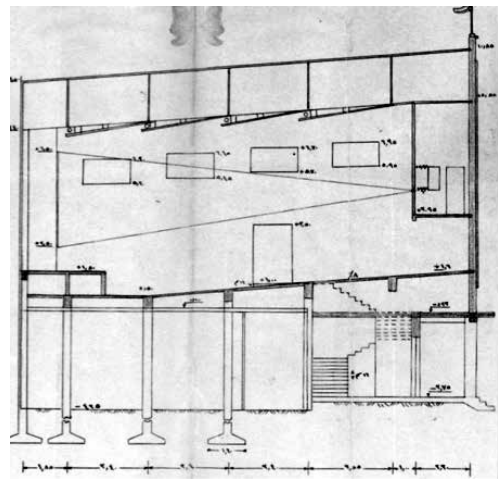
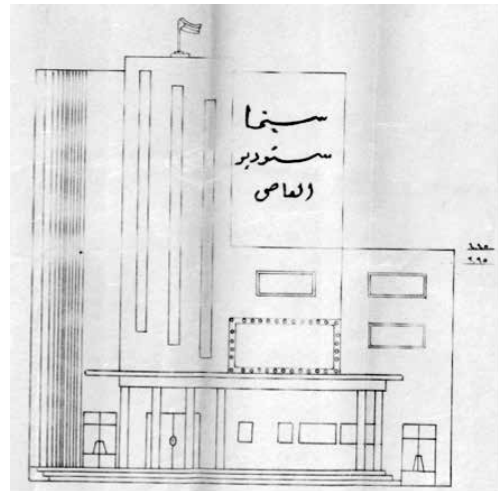
which entailed changing the furniture and replacing the original grey seats with dark brown ones. The studio was also used to screen films, but screening in the studio started half an hour later than in the cinema to allow the film reels to be passed from the projector in the cinema to that in the studio.

During the Jordanian rule, the cinema experienced its times of glory, particularly during the religious feast ('Id) holiday. Two films were screened each day: one at 4:00 pm and one at 7:00 pm. The ruling authorities controlled the type of films screened. Usually, people entered the auditorium one hour before the film would start. "It was a chaotic moment as everyone was running to get the best seat in the hall," Rabeeh al-Assi recalls – this despite the efforts of Muhammad Ana'nish, who was responsible of organizing access to the hall. He continued:

The show used to start with the Jordanian royal anthem, followed by comic shows, commercials, and trailers for the upcoming films, and the film to be screened that day. A break of five minutes was scheduled to give the people the chance to smoke in the foyer or to use the cinema services such as the cafeteria and toilets.

The show started precisely at 4:00 pm and lasted for one hour and forty-five minutes if the film was Arabic or Western, and would exceed two hours if it was Indian.

During the 'Id holidays, the cinema was a preferred destination for both children and adults and it was popular for being cheaper than the other four cinemas in the city that competed to show Arabic, Indian, and Western movies. On the 'Id days, the cinema screened films from 8:00am until the late hours of the night. People gathered in long queues before the ticket offices and most of the time the tickets were sold out or re-sold at higher prices outside the cinema by groups of youth who would liaise with the controller to buy a number of tickets for this purpose.



Figures 5 and 6. Al-Assi Cinema main façade (left) and section (right). Source: Nablus municipality

Two prominent Egyptian stars, the actress Na‘ima ‘Akif and the actor Husayn Sidqi visited the cinema during the Jordanian era, the first to promote her 1957 film *Tamr Hanna* and the latter to promote his 1958 film *Khalid Ibn al-Walid*. Rabeeh al-Assi narrates how those visits were important to the cinema and to the people who had only seen those actors on television:

The day when Husayn Sidqi visited Nablus, my father went to Amman and accompanied Sidqi to Nablus. He was invited to our home for lunch and he met the public figures of the city. Before screening the film, he appeared to the audience from the door next to the stage and introduced his film; he greeted the crowd amidst a wave of clapping.

Rabeeh also remembers Na‘ima ‘Akif’s visit to Nablus, which took place when he was in elementary school. He recalls:

Pupils used to go to school from 8:00 am to 12:00 noon, then have a lunch break until 1:30 pm, then back to school until 3:30pm. During the lunch break, I went home, my mother told me that Na‘ima ‘Akif is our guest today and she will take lunch with the family. I asked my mother to have my hair combed and to put cologne on me to go and see her. I went in and she picked me up and put a kiss on my cheek, then I went back to school and I told everyone about this.

Al-Assi Cinema Studio screened movies that attracted youth fond of adventure, thriller, and action movies. Tawfiq Hadad remembers the way the cinema advertised upcoming films on sandwich boards:

Two boards were fixed to each other from the top, leaving a space in the middle equaling the size of a person’s head, then this person carries the boards so that one face is on his front and the other on his back and both carry the film’s poster. The person used to stroll around the streets along with a boy who carried a bell. Whenever they reached a crossroads, they would stop and the boy would ring the bell to bring the attention of people who would stop and listen to an explanation about the film, the actors, and a brief summary of its story.

Tawfiq remembers the screenings of the Indian film *Sangam*, produced in 1964, and the Arabic films *al-Khataya*, produced in 1962 and starring ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Nadia Lutfi, and *Ma‘budat al-Jamahir*, produced in 1967 and starring ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Shadia. On Fridays, the cinema scheduled films at 10:00 am for students, who could show their student cards to receive discounted tickets, though only for the hall seats.

The cinema was a gateway to the world as well as a space for social gathering where each visitor had his own reason and incentive to attend and be part of that space. Rabeeh al-Assi states:

People enjoyed going to the cinema, it was part of their weekend and holiday activities. Women of the city were imitating what they saw in the films in terms of fashion and haircuts or even dancing with hula-hoops. On Thursday, before going to the cinema, women of rich families would spend the afternoon getting new haircuts, doing their make-up, and putting on new dresses. Watching a new film was an opportunity to look for a bride for those who wanted to get married.

With the emergence of martial arts films at the end of the 1960s, people were racing to get tickets, especially for the films starring Bruce Lee. After the films, they imitated the actors and a large number of fights took place at the end of every film. Moreover, many martial arts clubs and gyms opened in the city and people started to follow the news of sportsmen, especially after they would return from participating in tournaments outside the country.

The golden era of the cinema started to fade after it was affected by political unrest. After the Israeli occupation in 1967, the cinema stopped for one year, then reopened. People feared going to the cinema, though distributors continued to bring new films. Families and girls stopped going to the cinema at night for security reasons and because of the uncontrolled quality of screened films. The audience by then was limited to men and male youths. This situation continued until the eruption of the first intifada in 1987, when the cinema suspended its shows after the screen was burnt by anonymous people. This was a sign of the negative attitudes that started to emerge against the cinema and its role in society, particularly set against the growing struggle with the Israeli occupation. Along with the declining interest in the cinema, the late 1980s witnessed the spread of video, which strongly competed with the cinema and exacerbated its crisis. Al-Assi Cinema reopened in 1994, but it was never able to return to its golden days. It remained open until it was shelled during Israeli incursions in 2002, and then its doors shut permanently.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Cinema Today: A Contested Fate**

Reopening the cinema did not achieve the intended returns, thus the heirs met in 1998 to discuss demolishing the cinema and building a commercial center that would include a cinema. However, they did not reach a consensus on this proposal and because of their large number (one hundred people), they decided to sell the cinema building. As Rabeeh al-Assi said: "Selling the cinema was an exit option to resolve the dispute among the heirs concerning the cinema's future." They advertised to sell the cinema locally on websites in 2010 (see figure 7), proposing alternative development options, such as demolishing the cinema to build a mall or a bank. However, ten percent of the cinema's



Figure 7. An online advertisement to sell al-Assi Cinema.

owners refused to approve its sale either because they opposed its demolition or sought more profit.

The cinema’s central location in close vicinity of the Nablus municipality building eventually gave rise to the idea of the municipality reusing its site. In a meeting on 13 May 2013, the municipal council decided to buy the cinema, and in 2014 the municipality purchased the cinema from its owners, al-Assi family, going through a lengthy process of acquisition that cost

1.25 million Jordanian dinars. The decision was approved by the absolute majority of the municipal council, with all the members of the council agreeing that buying the cinema at the requested price was an opportunity that should not be missed. The amount paid to buy the cinema was not high compared to prices in adjacent locations, where similar land cost double the price paid or even more.

It took the municipality two years to finalize the cinema’s purchase from the heirs because some of them were living abroad. Later, in its meeting of 26 January 2016, the municipal council took the decision to demolish the cinema. The demolition decision evoked the sentiments of city residents, who felt an attachment to the place as part of the city’s modern history. Rabeeh al-Assi expressed this, “I feel very sad when I walk by the street where the cinema is, and today I don’t look in the direction of the cinema because I cannot imagine that the place in which I spent all my childhood will be demolished.” An owner of a shop near the cinema said, “The cinema for me was part of my daily life. Watching the daily practices of the people coming to the cinema and the crowd which gathered in front of the cinema are events that made an identity for the place.”

The municipality, on the other hand, tried to justify its decision. In an interview, the city engineer ‘Azzam Qasrawi said that:

The cinema doesn’t have any value in terms of architecture or architectural details; it has a ceiling from asbestos and the rear façade is ugly. This building does not represent any architectural period or typology or structural period (like the British Mandate construction typology techniques). As a municipality, we have to demolish this building. There is no decision what to do to replace it: there is a proposal to make it a parking area or part of a large project that includes demolishing the cinema, the municipality building, and a few other buildings and to install municipal services buildings.

The second proposal (see figure 8) would affect the municipality building which was designed by the famous architect Hani Arafat, and represents an example of modern architecture in Nablus.<sup>3</sup>

The fate of the cinema became a source of debate among residents, professionals,



and decision-makers with a focus on the value of city spaces, especially those linked to the collective memory of people and not protected by a legal framework. Interviews with people working in the cinema area or who had previously lived in its surroundings, in addition to academics and university students, revealed contradictory opinions about the value of the cinema. People who lived in the period when the cinema was flourishing (between 1952 and 1967) expressed what the cinema represented to their daily life, mainly as an entertainment and meeting place. Young people were enthusiastic to know more about the cinema, which was, in their opinion, a sign of a progressive cultural life that their parents enjoyed decades ago while they, themselves, are deprived of such opportunities in their city.

Al-Assi Cinema became a sort of a contested space because of the different opinions regarding its value. The municipality, in its unilateral decision to demolish the cinema, ignored any possible opposing reaction to its decision and thus ignored the residents' right to their city and its collectively used buildings and spaces. Al-Assi Cinema is a private building that provided a public social service and people have a special attachment to it. The residents as city holders could participate in deciding the future of an important monument as part of a contribution to the body of urban lived experience: residents can legitimately claim the right to the city, including their right to participation in any decision related to the re/production of such an important monument as al-Assi Cinema.<sup>4</sup>

The value of the cinema as a structure and a function was debated in academic institutions such as an-Najah National University, as well as among professionals and people in the street. Since the building is not protected by any legal framework, nor it is listed by the municipality as a cultural and architectural monument, it was easy for the municipality to take a unilateral decision. When it was announced, the decision was subject to criticism, especially by all those who believe that the building and its function have certain values and qualities. However, this belief is not shared by an important segment of society, including professionals, who see the cinema embodying no important value to the extent that it blocks the development of the central location on which it sits. Architect Reema Arafat said, "The municipality bought it for its strategic location, not for its cultural value; the cinema now is seen as economic capital not as a cultural one." Rafeeq Haddad, who experienced the times of the cinema's glory, said, "Demolishing the cinema is a necessity for today's urban transformations due to the disinclination of going to the cinema in its old structure."

Social transformation cannot be ignored while speaking about devaluing al-Assi Cinema Studio. During the golden era of the cinema, not all people considered the

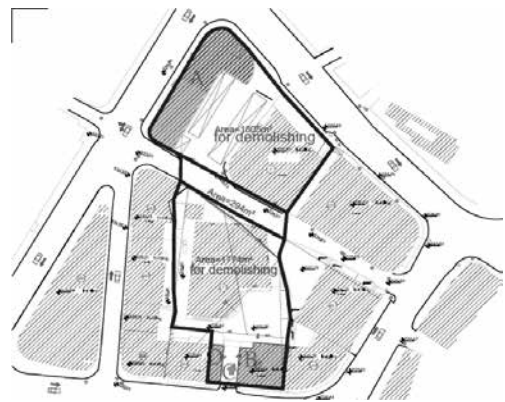


Figure 8. Proposed area for demolition delineated by a dark boundary. Source: Nablus municipality map.

cinema a safe place where their daughters could go. Hani Alazizi recalls, “my uncle took my aunt to the cinema without their father’s permission. When his father knew, he did not let them home when they returned, telling them instead to go back to the place they came from.” During the period of the Israeli occupation, films were unregulated, and this was unacceptable to families and led to the cinema being stigmatized as immoral. Mohammad Atta argues that:

People do not have any sentimental feelings toward the cinema, and one can imagine how the reaction of the locals would be if the cinema was bought by a private investor; an example given is the flourmill [*al-mathana*] that was constructed during the British Mandate and was bought by a private investor. It was demolished on 13 November 2015 with the approval [with reservation]of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and no reaction was heard from the locals. It is only because the municipality bought the cinema that the city inhabitants started to criticize its plans.

The municipality asked for the approval of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities for the demolishing of the cinema building. After communications with the ministry, the latter expressed no objections on the subject of demolition. “This happened because the cinema building is not protected by any law as it was constructed during the 1950s,” said architect Ihab Daoud, deputy general director for the cultural heritage sector in the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. In his own view, the cinema building should be kept and conserved, even though it is not protected by any law; the building has a value to the local people and it represents a history of culture and modernity.

Demolishing the flourmill was a precedent that paved the way for the municipality to go ahead and approve demolition of the cinema. The municipality was accused of being less concerned about the value of local traditional and modern architectural heritage when it comes to commercial space in the city center. Several professionals in the field of architecture stated that the complacency of the city inhabitants while demolishing one of the important city landmarks, *al-mathana* (the flourmill), even if it was in bad condition, encouraged the municipality to demolish buildings without reluctance. In addition, the ignorance of citizens toward their cultural heritage, the value of architecture, and the architectural significance of the buildings made it easier not to consider their opinions.

Yet some city inhabitants fear the consequences of demolishing the cinema. They claim that it is not only about losing a building, it is about what the building represents to their memories and to the culture of the city. They also fear seeing other cases treated like the cinema, knowing that there is a concentration of high value cultural heritage sites in the city center, where land prices are highest and vacant plots are rare. Erasing unprotected valuable buildings and constructing new ones in the city center could become a trend. Dr. Hasan al-Qadi, head of department of Architecture at an-Najah National University, says of al-Assi Cinema:

this building has a high cultural value; it has a meaning for thousands of people and it is part of a cultural legacy and a witness for the beginning of cinema in Nablus. The evaluation of the building's value is not only determined through the aesthetic value or personal judgment and physical state.

## **The Duality of Heritage and Modernity**

Many questions were raised in interviews with local citizens: Is the cinema important for the inhabitants? Does it have a value for the city or not? As no assessment was done for this building, nor for many others, how would young people see its significance and thus its importance to them? One of the city residents said,

I am not with or against demolishing the cinema, but I am with establishing a specialized committee to evaluate buildings that are not listed as important buildings and to then decide what to keep and what to demolish. We cannot base our decisions just on emotional reactions of the local people.

On the other hand, keeping the cinema building would not be the only challenge. The problem lies in the future of that building, a complex that now comprises the cinema, the studio, and other additions near the studio. Some residents called for renovating the cinema to serve its original function again: if the municipality is not able to do so, it has to sell it to the private sector with a condition to use it primarily as a cinema. Proponents of this plan argued that, first, the building is historic and rooted in the memories of many of the city inhabitants; and second, it was built to be a cinema, not to be a single story that serves as a cinema in a larger building. Rushdi Mabroukeh said, "If it is renovated, we would protect a historic symbol and it would be a very good profitable project, as the municipality plans. Its history and setting would attract more people and would be a good investment."

Amid the endless discussion about the value of a modern building as heritage against the needs for city development comes the fact that the cinema has been abandoned for a long time. Why during that period was there no effort to reuse it by the municipality, civil society organizations, or the people? Why did the cinema become important and valuable for the people and a representation of the city's culture only when the demolition order was issued? And what would be better from a planning or architectural perspective, to demolish the cinema and rebuild a place for the people's service or to restore the function of the cinema?

The case of al-Assi Cinema Studio shows that the duality of heritage and modernity continues to fuel discussions about urban public spaces; despite the growing attention toward cultural values and elements of identity, there are still people who do not see those values and do not mind losing them forever. In an interview with a resident who lived the golden era of al-Assi Cinema, he said, "Rivoli Cinema was not demolished and turned

to a commercial building, why is no one against its current use although this damaged its value?" Some others said "that al-Assi Cinema site has turned into a dumping place in the city center." They do not see the building bearing any architectural value.

On the other hand, there are opinions that criticize the plans to construct a commercial center instead of the cinema as contributing to exacerbating the traffic problems and congestion in the city center. Other opinions proposed to turn the place into a cultural center ("Nablus Cultural Palace") or a museum for the city because the majority of cities in the world have museums or cultural centers to serve the local community. Some people who work around the cinema think that the commercial capital overwhelms every other aspect in the city including heritage, culture, and history.

The cinema building nowadays is a deteriorating structure: part of its roof is covered with asbestos, a carcinogenic material considered dangerous for health and public safety. Despite this, its renovation and reuse would be a significant contribution to the culture of the city as a testimony to recent history that should be conveyed to future generations. With all the debates initiated and the emotions provoked after the decision to demolish the cinema and the justifications given by the municipality, it is necessary to rethink the making of cultural policy, especially with the growing devaluation of important cultural spaces. Urban coalitions should be formed to enforce the adoption of proper cultural policies that do not allow valuable cultural monuments to be treated based solely on economic value and profitable use. Amid the contradicting views, there is one question still to be answered: what if the cinema is left in neglect, abandoned to die slowly (destroyed due to time factors or vandalism)? Would the city inhabitants react and, if so, how?

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*Mohammad Abu Hammad is an architect and urbanist working at UNESCO's Ramallah office.*

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Mary Pelletier, "Final Curtain Looms for Ghost Cinemas of Nablus," *Middle East Eye*, 5 April 2016, online at [www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/remnants-citys-love-affair-film-1947638588](http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/remnants-citys-love-affair-film-1947638588) (accessed 25 January 2017).
- 2 Pelletier, "Final Curtain Looms."
- 3 'Imad Sa'ada, "Qarar hadm 'sinama al-'Asi' yuthiru jadalalan fi Nablus" [Decision to Demolish

al-Assi Cinema Prompts Debate in Nablus], *al-Quds*, 4 February 2016, online at [www.alquds.com/articles/1454610749695648400](http://www.alquds.com/articles/1454610749695648400) (accessed 26 January 2017).

- 4 See: Mark Purcell, "Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and Its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant," *GeoJournal* 58 (2002): 99–108; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).