

# Cultivating Hope: Thoughts on Gaza amid the Ongoing Nakba

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## Abstract

Khaldun Bshara uses architectural restoration to examine the wellspring of hope and optimism within the Palestinian people, especially in the challenging context of Gaza. The author's involvement in heritage restoration projects in Gaza offers a view of the significance of preserving historic buildings in a region rich with history despite the process of design and planning being heavily circumscribed by the context of occupation and conflict. These restoration efforts, even in an uncertain future, highlight the hope, resourcefulness, and determination of the Palestinians in Gaza to overcome limitations imposed by Israel's blockade on essential construction materials. Bshara notes that the cost and time efficiency of projects in Gaza, compared with those in the West Bank, underscores the adaptability, creativity, willingness, and resoluteness of practitioners to address daunting challenges. The author finds Gaza to be a symbol of resilience and resistance, where hope may not be able to undo past loss, but can continue to inspire the pursuit of an alternative future, devoid of oppression and colonialism.

## Keywords

Gaza siege; Gaza resilience; ongoing Nakba; heritage restoration; context-based design; design as ethnography; post-war reconstruction.

Here on the slopes of hills, facing the dusk and the cannon of time  
Close to the gardens of broken shadows,  
We do what prisoners do,  
And what the jobless do:  
We cultivate hope.

– Mahmoud Darwish, “Under Siege” (2002)

We, in Gaza, are fine. How are you? What about your consciousness,  
values, everything? We are concerned about the world.

– Reem Abu Jaber from Dayr al-Balah, Gaza,  
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During a heritage crafts conference held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a scholar posed a profound question, inquiring about the wellspring of optimism and hope within the Palestinian people, noting the use of dark humor to draw attention to the everyday heritage practices of Palestinians. The question left me momentarily unprepared to respond, since the truth is that people who are truly hopeful and optimistic do not necessarily engage in rational thinking nor can they articulate their attitude in words – instead, they live it.

In that moment, I improvised my response, drawing attention to the ongoing “Great March of Return” rallies in Gaza that had begun in March 2018, and were still ongoing six months later. Palestinian children, youth, the elderly, girls and boys, men and women, had been participating in these rallies on a weekly, and at times, daily basis. They gathered peacefully at the perimeter barrier erected by the Israeli military forces, a barrier meant to prevent Palestinians in Gaza from returning to their homeland, in today’s Israel.

Every Friday, they marched, assembled, raised their voices in chants, and even hurled stones at the Israeli posts, aware of the potential dangers – being tear gassed, shot at, injured, or killed. Yet, they returned week after week to register their protest at the blockade, at the siege that has entrapped them since 2007, and at the larger issue of being denied return. They hoped that the outcome would someday change and that they might find their way back to their homeland through this collective symbolic gesture. Their steadfastness, persistence, and courage in the face of danger exhibited the unwavering hope and optimism of the Palestinian people.

People who are subjected to colonization – which is inherently violent, inhumane, and irrational – cannot be held to conventional notions of rationality. This does not imply that they lack rationality, but rather that they undertake a rationality that is forged by their abnormal situation.

For the colonized, stripped of their land and space, their lives and aspirations revolve around time, of which they possess an abundance. Time, in this context, becomes the weapon of the vulnerable, the weapon of the disenfranchised, which can be deployed in their enduring struggle. From the outside, we may label it as *sumud*

(steadfastness) or *sabr* (patience). Under the constant pressure of siege, there is an excess of waiting, an abundance of time, and bundles of hopes and dreams.

On a micro level, the example of Palestinian prisoners can help us to understand the bound-up relationship between time and hope. Consider a Palestinian prisoner serving a life sentence in Israeli jails, detained for resisting the policies of settler colonialism. The prisoner's chances of release are negligible, if not entirely absent. Why would this prisoner choose to marry and embark on the complicated operation of smuggling their semen to facilitate a meticulously scrutinized and supervised fertilization process, all in the hope of conceiving a child whom they may never have the chance to hold in their arms? Similarly, what would motivate a woman to marry a prisoner and bear his children under such challenging circumstances? In a world where the odds for justice seem insurmountable, enduring hope and unlimited time are the essential forces that drive the calculations for otherwise incomprehensible actions.

As an architect and heritage practitioner, I witnessed first-hand these context-dependent rules during heritage restoration in Gaza's historic areas, where I was fortunate to play a role in the restoration of several historic buildings: al-Saqqa mansion in 2013 and Dar al-Ghusayn in 2020, both in Gaza City, and Dayr al-Khadr (Saint George Monastery) in Dayr al-Balah in 2015. In addition, my colleagues at the Riwaq Centre restored al-Wahidi House courtyards in Gaza City and helped in planning other conservation projects in 2022.



Figure 1. The restored courtyard of al-Saqqa mansion, Gaza City, 2014. RIWAQ photo archives.



Figure 2. A children's outdoor activity in al-Khadr Library, a project of the Nawa for Culture and Arts Association in Dayr al-Balah, beneficiaries of Riwaq's restoration of the fourth century Dayr al-Khadr (Saint George Monastery), Gaza, 2017. RIWAQ photo archives.

These buildings are among the historic treasures of Gaza, echoing back through millennia of continuous habitation in Gaza, a living repository of history on the Mediterranean. Every civilization that passed through or laid claim to Gaza left its mark, leaving behind remnants of its existence while carrying away pieces of its essence. This city's important harbor, Mina' al-Zuhur (Harbor of Flowers), was situated at the crossroads of the Silk Road and coastal Spice Route linking the pharaohs of Egypt in the south to the Persian kings in the east. It was also a nexus for trade and cultural exchange with the Roman Empire and Byzantium Constantinople in the north, facilitating the flow of goods and ideas.

The rich and tumultuous history of the Gaza region, and of Gaza City in particular, is underserved by the limited number of historic buildings that remain. The tangible manifestations of this rich history are only hinted at by the city's ancient walls and fortifications, the sacred spaces of temples, churches, monasteries, mosques, shrines, and mausoleums, as well as the communal hubs of hammams, bazaars, serais, the splendid mansions of the elite alongside the more humble dwellings of common people. Taken together, these material remnants suggest an area that remained vibrant throughout the ages. Riwaq's Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine (2006) documents over four hundred historic structures, primarily concentrated in Gaza City. A significant portion of its historic buildings were destroyed during World



Figure 3. The central hall of Dar al-Ghusayn after restoration, Gaza City, 2020. RIWAQ photo archives.

War I military operations while others gave way to the rapid urbanization and surge of refugees from western Palestine in the wake of the Nakba in 1948, as high-rise buildings were constructed to accommodate a sudden tripling of the population.

The recent restoration projects followed each of a series of brutal assaults on Gaza: Dar al-Saqqa following the 2012 war, Dayr al-Khadr after the 2014 war, Dar al-Ghusayn after the 2018 and 2019 wars, and al-Wahidi following the 2021 war. These historic mansions were adapted by Riwaq in partnership with Iwan, a local community center in Gaza, to serve as sanctuaries for community centers for women, children, and cultural activities in what is called the most densely populated parcel of land in the world.

In the context of Gaza, the concept behind restoration – the act of returning structures to a previous state of preservation – raises troubling questions. What significance does it hold to restore a building when it may not survive the next wave of destruction? This presents a choice that became an integral part of the curatorial statement for the fifth Riwaq Biennale (2015–16) that grappled with the idea of sustainability. The term was reimagined in Gaza as “a biennale of destruction,” when destruction is what we anticipate but fervently hope to avoid.

More difficult is the question: What does it mean to embark on a “post-war reconstruction” effort when the newly erected structures are destined to become the targets of the next assault? The resounding response is “hope.” Hope remains the driving force for resilience of the people of Gaza, who inspire the donors, the





Figure 4. The restored al-Wahidi courtyard, Basma Center inauguration, Gaza City, 2022. RIWAQ photo archives.

dedicated implementing agencies, and heritage practitioners like myself to initiate projects that focus on the future even where the future is so uncertain.

While Gazans hold various opinions about their political representation and the multitude of political parties, a remarkable consensus prevails regarding the importance of resistance. The people of Gaza aspire to live in an environment of *amn wa aman* (security and safety), but not at the cost of accepting occupation. Ramallah is often depicted as subservient, as if on a quest for peace, prosperity, and happiness, while Gaza emerges as the epicenter of continuous resistance, decline, and suffering.

During a taxi ride from Bayt Hanun's crossing point to Dayr al-Balah, I had a revealing conversation with a taxi driver who was clearly earning a modest income. His willingness to spend the entire day with me in Dayr al-Balah for a mere twenty dollars spoke volumes about his perspective. He firmly declared, "*al-karameh* (dignity) is what matters most; without it, life loses its meaning." In his view, upholding one's dignity in the face of adversity takes precedence over all else, even if it means standing up to Israeli forces when necessary.

Why does the restoration of heritage in Gaza serve as a unique window through which we can glimpse the essence of Gaza, the boldness of hope within seemingly "hopeless" circumstances? George Marcus, my PhD supervisor at the University of California – Irvine, once expressed his envy regarding my dual roles as an architect and an anthropologist. He pointed out that, as an architect, I could conduct ethnographic research in much the same way that I designed homes and buildings in my studio. In a

studio, architects are constantly negotiating their authority and power dynamics with clients, often feeling a sense of powerlessness. Anthropologists, however, operate in a realm of knowledge production that is stripped of any presumed authority, steeped in the post-colonial, decolonized principles of knowledge creation.

In the design of restoration projects in Gaza, we are thrust into confrontation with this reality. We encounter a context that not only shapes the way we think about things but, more significantly, dictates the way we must approach the making of these thoughts and concepts. Gaza becomes a living example of the tangible interplay between the realms of power, knowledge, and creativity in the face of adversity.

In the West Bank, much like many other countries or regions, architects and restorers enjoy the freedom to choose from a rich array of materials, techniques, equipment, and supplies readily available in the market. Typically, the restoration process begins with a conceptual design, an abstract idea, which gradually takes shape as it is translated into a physical reality on the ground. In the unique context of Gaza, however, this conventional process is reversed. The severe limitations on materials and construction techniques is a result of the Israeli prohibition of approximately seventy basic materials and goods on a list of potential “dual-use” (possibility of military purposes). This contraband of everyday items (which include spaghetti, chocolate, and hair conditioner) proscribes essential construction materials such as wood, steel, and cement. So we begin with the materials that are immediately available and work backward, crafting a design that fits the limitations and possibilities of these available resources. This method might be described as a *maqluba* (upside-down) approach, like the beloved Palestinian dish of the same name. It becomes a process filled with surprises, where one anticipates the outcome with an exhilarating sense of wonder, even when there is a reasonable idea of what to expect. The willingness to adapt to the context shows an extraordinary openness and creativity toward problem-solving that defines the spirit of the people in Gaza.

Riwaq’s ambitious mission in 2013 to restore the historic al-Saqqa mansion began with a comprehensive design, detailed bills of quantities, and precise specifications for the project that we gave to our colleagues in Gaza for organizing site visits with prospective contractors. We soon learned that our designs on paper had little value in Gaza. We made a complete redesign of the project, one that was centered around the materials and supplies accessible in the Gaza Strip’s markets and workshops.

During our experience in helping to restore Gaza’s heritage, we were profoundly moved by the deep determination exhibited by the students, interns, architects, engineers, skilled craftsmen, diligent laborers, and resourceful contractors – in contrast to the stock phrases we often encountered in our West Bank projects: “It cannot be done” or “Inshallah” (God willing), frequently a euphemism for denial. Even the word “difficult” seemed to be a foreign concept; there was always the willingness to try. The projects we executed in Gaza outshone their West Bank counterparts in efficiency; they were completed at half the cost and within half the time allotted. The atmosphere surrounding these project sites in Gaza was invariably joyful, often punctuated by hearty laughter.

The effectiveness of conservation practice in the Gaza Strip is a sharp critique of the alienating approach that has come to permeate our existence in the West Bank, particularly in the post-'Arafat era of 2004 to the present. The push toward structural adjustment policies, privatization, and dissolution of public services (except for the security apparatus) has brought stress, debt, and a culture of individualism. Gaza emerges as a symbol of resistance, challenging the choices that we, as Palestinians, are striving to achieve, wherever we may be. It raises essential questions: Who ultimately endures the siege? What does it mean to have a liberated body yet remain trapped beneath layers of apprehensions and anxieties?

As I write these final words in early November 2023, the Gaza Strip remains a fragile testament to resilience amid relentless destruction. Its buildings, infrastructures, stones, sands, and the ceaseless sea have endured unconscionable pain and thousands of lives have been lost and many thousands more changed forever by the attempt to erase the very essence of an entire community. But Gaza, much like the legendary phoenix, has astounded us time and again, rising from the ashes of despair. Hope cannot resurrect the fallen or restore the fractured landscapes, but it can feed our spirit and ignite the fire of our imagination, conjuring an alternative future. If it is meant to live with an open wound, then Gaza lives with unyielding bravery – a testament to an unbending human spirit that defies oppression and seeks freedom.

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