

EDITORIAL

House and Home Materialities and Subjectivities

It is a strange experience to write an introduction for the first of two special issues of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* on the theme of Palestinian homes and houses at a time when we are largely confined indoors during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We recognize, of course, that we belong to the privileged minority of people in this world who still have jobs, monthly salaries, comfortable places to live, and resources for working remotely. Like everyone else, however, this pandemic-driven isolation – somewhat similar to long-term involuntary confinements familiar to Palestinians through curfews, house arrests, and military invasions – has deepened our appreciation for the centrality of house and home to Palestinian life, as well as for the generative impact of these two concepts on advancing the field of Palestinian studies.

This is also a strange experience because it was over two years ago, in the spring of 2018, that Beshara Doumani and Alex Winder began organizing the sixth annual workshop of New Directions in Palestinian Studies (NDPS) on the theme of “Palestinian Homes and Houses: Subjectivities and Materialities.”¹ The idea emerged from a simple observation Doumani made about the experience of summers in Palestine: everyday conversations between family members, neighbors, friends, and even strangers, disproportionately revolves around house and home. This may well be true year-around, but several factors intensify this phenomenon in the summer. June through August is the wedding season, which unleashes anxieties about the availability and cost of housing. It is also a time of feverish house construction following the end of the rainy season and an all-too-

brief spring interlude. For the tens of thousands of expatriates on their annual visits, summer is a season of mixed emotions about places of belonging. After the usual tense experience of crossing borders, the drive home reveals an estranged landscape where villages, towns, and cities are increasingly suffocated by sprawling Zionist colonies, walls, checkpoints, and the infrastructure that serves them. Entering the family house and reintegrating to “home” is a moment of joy that struggles to remain whole under the grinding stress and survival strategies of life under occupation. Water shortages, electrical power outages, and the relentless litany of house demolitions by the Israeli military are constant reminders that houses also have precarious lives.

At first, the thought was to devote the workshop to the theme of the roof as a liminal space for unpacking the conversations about house and home. The roof is a material landscape where buildings are physically connected to water, electrical, satellite, and cable infrastructures that are so essential to everyday life. Roofs are also an affective landscape of communal sociabilities and private escapes. During uprisings, they are sites of protest and a target of soldiers. After a series of widening discussions, which came to include gardens and domiciles as equally important spaces, the idea expanded to the twin concepts of house (materialities) and home (subjectivities).

The simple binary of materialities versus subjectivities is for heuristic purposes only, as the concepts of house and home are organically intertwined and expansive concepts which enable fresh new perspectives. As the call for papers issued in early fall 2018 articulated, “home” is a vexed concept for those who share a history of displacement, an experience from which few Palestinians are exempt. Home can be seen as a subjective field of memory and loss for a geographically dispersed, marginalized, and largely stateless people. But home is also the primary site of social relations, emotional investments, and aesthetic sensibilities. It is the nexus for quotidian strategies of survival and resistance; and a silent witness to deeply emotional entanglements, secrets, and fissures; as well as the insecurities of permanent impermanence. Whether inhabited, remembered, or imagined, home is the engine room of Palestinian subjectivities.

“House” is the primary site of capital investment for most Palestinians who live within the borders of Mandate Palestine, primarily because their marginalized political and economic position as a people denied leaves them with few other options. The construction of houses and transformation into homes, often a product of a lifetime of work and sacrifice, constitutes the core of the built environment. Houses and the built environment, in turn, are shaped by the power relations embedded in the organization of labor, property, and urban planning regimes; and in the physical infrastructures and networks of energy, water, telecommunications, and the circulation and production of building materials. At the same time, Palestinian houses are inextricably linked to relentless processes of demolitions, evictions, and land dispossession.

The discursive and materialist dimensions of Palestinian homes and houses raise a host of questions about the politics of daily life. How are houses made into homes and vice versa? What can homes tell us about gender and generational dynamics and the production of “Palestinianness”? How are domestic relations and living arrangements

shaped by permit systems that regulate and restrict building, residency, ownership, and marriage? What does home mean in the context of serial displacements, economic insecurity, and the scattering of family? What can we learn from variations in design and building material of Palestinian houses across space and time? What can the notions of homes and houses tell us about consumption practices and class dynamics of Palestinians in a wide range of settings, from refugee camps in Gaza and Lebanon to unrecognized villages in Israel and planned middle-class neighborhoods in Ramallah, and from the Galilee and the Naqab to Paterson, New Jersey, and Santiago, Chile?

This intertwined relationship between house and home is apparent in three articles in this issue (Jacob Norris on the homes of mobile merchant families during the Ottoman period, Kareem Rabie on housing in the post-Oslo West Bank, and Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins on Airbnb in Palestine), as well as in articles slated for the forthcoming issue (*JQ* 84). All of these peer-reviewed contributions were initially presented at the NDPS workshop on “Palestinian Homes and Houses” held at Brown University on 15–16 March 2019. Although they focus on different historical periods and locations, and approach the subject matter from different perspectives (history, anthropology, political economy, and cultural studies), all are characterized by an intimate knowledge of the Palestinian condition based on years of field and archival work. All set forth micro-detailed analysis while addressing larger global and comparative issues.

Palestinian studies is marked by deep ruptures in time and space that make it difficult to see beyond the colonial frame. The pre-colonial period is often imagined as a different country of uncertain relevance to that which emerged following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of British colonial rule. The *Jerusalem Quarterly*, under the leadership of Salim Tamari, has long dedicated itself to breaking down the barriers separating the last four to five decades of the Ottoman period from the British Mandate and, in so doing, exposing the vitality, contingency, and deep currents of continuity that shaped this tumultuous and transformative period. Jacob Norris’s “Mobile Homes: The Refashioning of Palestinian Merchant Homes in the Late Ottoman Period” is a prime example in this regard. An intimate familiarity – gained over years of deep archival and field research on the social structure, political economy, and global mobility of merchant families in Bethlehem – saturates this detailed micro-history of Hosh al-Dabdoub, a building erected outside the entrance of the Old City of Bethlehem in the late 1850s. In a sweeping analysis of patterns of mobility, trade networks, and family relations that crosses generations and continents and that ranges from architectural analysis to reflections on the visual language of “family firm” logos, Norris urges us to reimagine modern Palestinian history from the perspective on how merchant family firms shaped the social relations, cultural sensibilities, and built environment of pre-1948 Palestine in ways that are still with us today.

In a wide-ranging essay on houses as both home and real estate in the post-Oslo Ramallah region, Kareem Rabie directly engages with a central question in Palestinian studies – what is exceptional and unexceptional about the Palestinians condition?

He focuses on housing development as a lens on class formation, homeownership, and private property in relationship to global capital. Unlike most other studies on this topic, Rabie does not dwell on “place-bound” analysis of Israeli government machinations and the collaborative practices of the Palestinian Authority. Rather, he makes a theoretical intervention about global capitalism supported by ethnographic research on middle-class aspirations for normalization and stability through house and land purchases facilitated by long-term debt. Rabie relates both approaches to a critique of dominant modes of knowledge production in Palestinian studies. His ambitious analytical framing is generative for future research agendas and shows that much more work in a similar vein is needed for other places and time periods. To take but one example, the relation between investment in real estate markets and local class formation has a long history in the region and is especially apparent in the European imperial competition over the “Holy Land” during the nineteenth-century and the Zionist colonization efforts that followed it.²

The title of Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins article, “Occupied Home-Sharing,” perfectly conveys the ironic twists as well as the double-edged sword faced by Palestinians who rent their homes in Palestine through the Airbnb platform. This provocative, innovative, and carefully thought-out essay shifts the analytical angle sideways, revealing channels of capillary flows of global capitalism in local settings that have remained largely out of view despite the enormous literature on the West Bank (including Jerusalem) since Oslo. More specifically, Stamatopoulou-Robbins explores what she calls the “micropractices” of house and home at the intersection where the gig economy of platform capitalism meets the carceral violence of settler colonialism and military occupation. The former’s logic assumes freedom of mobility, access to sophisticated financial services, a stable infrastructure of electrical and water delivery, and homogenized space for new social connections that renders invisible relations of power and inequality while simultaneously aggravating them. The logic of the latter creates the many ironic contrasts of “occupied home-sharing,” such as restrictions on the mobility of homeowners who serve the needs of the hypermobile occupation tourists. Stamatopoulou-Robbins’s fascinating ethnography of hospitality, decor, and intimacy also illuminates the longing for the stability of a normalized middle-class way of life, albeit in the context of a stratified social formation based on a regime of private property in land and housing.

This issue of *JQ* also includes a typically rich trove of contributions beyond the thematic cluster of peer-reviewed articles. Lisa Taraki, “Ordinary Lives: A Small-Town Middle Class at the Turn of the Twentieth Century in Palestine” complements the above three articles by documenting the intense focus of a rising provincial middle class on stone houses and land acquisition as the primary metrics of their social mobility. By focusing on Ramallah from roughly 1850 to 1950, Taraki pushes the spatial boundaries of Palestinian social and cultural history to include Ottoman-era villages that became Mandate-era towns. Hitherto, Jerusalem and Jaffa have been (and will likely remain through the foreseeable future), the uncontested king and queen, respectively, of scholarly research, but interest in Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Salfit,

al-Bireh and, not surprisingly considering its current role as the putative capital of the Palestinian Authority, Ramallah, has intensified over the past fifteen years. Taraki also pushes the envelope by focusing on an internally diverse social stratum that attained middle-class status, albeit, of a parochial low-brow kind; it stands in contrast to the cosmopolitan public personas and personal lifestyles of elite families and upper-middle-class professionals and businessmen in Jaffa and Jerusalem who have been the subject of great fascination to scholars. In an engaging narrative of social biographies spanning three generations, Taraki draws on a plethora of sources – interviews, family trees, newspaper advertisements, municipality archives, and traveler accounts – to reconstruct the social biographies of individuals (mostly men) and families who went optimistically into the world and made a space for themselves. Put side by side with Norris’ article, Taraki shows how the differences between the emerging Ramallah middle class and the Bethlehemite family firms of merchants – their socio-economic terrain, the networks in which they were enmeshed, the destinations of their emigrants – produced distinct effects in each location. The contrast between the two towns, both situated in the mountainous region around Jerusalem, shows clearly the significance of such detailed social and economic histories in upending facile generalizations about Palestinian communities based solely on their religious affiliation or geographic location. We are also pleased to include a paper which received honorable mention for the 2020 Ibrahim Dakkak Award for Outstanding Essay on Jerusalem: Laura Tibi, “The Roots for a Palestinian Nahda”: Zulfa al-Sa‘di and the Advent of Palestinian Modern Art.” Along with another essay by Ruba Totah, “Palestinian Performance: A Struggle of the Collective and the Personal,” these two essays address the rich cultural and artistic worlds of Palestinians, with particular attention to the role of gender in the (re) construction of national heritage in the context of modernist cultural currents. Laura Tibi seeks to reintegrate the visual artist Zulfa al-Sa‘di into Palestinian art history both as an individual, and in terms of her formal and stylistic contributions which combine nascent nationalism with modernism. The focus on al-Sa‘di’s exhibition at the First National Arab Fair, held in Jerusalem in 1933, elicited acclaim, but then faded quickly (and nearly entirely) from the landscape of Palestinian art thereafter. Ruba Totah brings to life the story of the pioneering al-Hakawati theatre group, formed in Jerusalem in 1977. Through performers’ individual recollections of their experiences, Totah examines the class, gender, generational, and political dynamics of this highly influential experiment in theatre arts.

Three very different takes on Jerusalem round out this issue. In an evocative and moving *Letter from Jerusalem*, “Behind the Big Blue Gate,” Mandy Turner reflects on her nearly ten years as director of the British Academy-funded Kenyon Institute in Shaykh Jarrah. Turner’s directorship transformed the Kenyon Institute from one of detached knowledge production about the Other to an institution engaged with people-centered cultural and intellectual projects. Turner, an insightful observer of and participant in Jerusalem life, describes the changes wrought on the neighborhood and city, and the complexity and contradictions therein. She writes: “Beautiful and bewitching – cruel and callous. Both are true of the Jerusalem I saw.” This is

followed by Roberto Mazza who takes us back to *JQ*'s familiar terrain, modernity and Jerusalem, in his review of Yair Wallach's, *A City in Fragments: Urban Text in Modern Jerusalem*. Finally comes the Facts & Figures section which features the highly informative report by al-Haq: *COVID-19 and the Systematic Neglect of East Jerusalem*. We are also including the map titled "Planned Annexation in Greater Jerusalem" which the Israeli NGO Ir Amim published recently.

Endnotes

- 1 New Directions in Palestinian Studies (NDPS) provides a platform for rigorous theoretical and methodological discussion of research agendas about Palestine and the Palestinians, and on the spaces of political mobilization that they open and foreclose. An initiative of the Center for Middle East Studies at Brown University, NDPS is dedicated to decolonizing the field of Palestinian studies and promoting its integration into larger streams of critical intellectual inquiry, especially by supporting the work of emerging scholars. For further details on NDPS, see online description at palestinianstudies.org (accessed 26 August 2020).
- 2 A number of case studies have brought greater clarity to the uneven impact of these capital flows on property relations in Palestine's diverse ecological and social spaces. A case in point is Munir Fakher Eldin's dissertation on the Bisan region during the late Ottoman and Mandate periods. Munir Fakher Eldin, "Communities of Owners: Land Law, Governance, and Politics in Palestine, 1858–1948" (PhD diss., New York University, 2008).