

The Husayni Neighborhood in Jerusalem

Space of Self-Invention

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Shaykh Jarrah and its architecture symbolize a space of aspiration. Walking its streets and observing its buildings and gardens, one experiences a distinctly modern Palestinian story of Jerusalem. As an architect, I am especially interested in the relationship between material-spatial culture and oral history. This article attempts to articulate the relationship between human experience and architecture using the Sa' id al-Husayni house as a case study. The house, and importantly its garden, constitutes an understudied piece of Palestinian urban cultural heritage. The study of such moments is urgent given the deliberate erosion of Jerusalem's Palestinian character. Here, architecture and storytelling serve as two languages that can testify to a cultural identity that has been systematically and gradually removed from the dominant narrative of the city of Jerusalem.

The Neighborhood

Shaykh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood of Jerusalem north of the Old City walls, was named after the tomb of Husam al-Din al-Jarrahi, a thirteenth-century emir and Salah al-Din's surgeon (figure 1). It is in keeping with the trend in Jerusalem, as elsewhere, to name places and areas after deceased people of significance. And yet, unlike other parts of Jerusalem that are marked by traditions and death, Shaykh Jarrah is experienced as a neighborhood of beginnings and invention, known today for its historically affluent residents, cafés, and international consulates.

The story of Shaykh Jarrah begins in the nineteenth century following the Ottoman land law of 1858, which facilitated a shift in land registration from largely communal tenure to personal property (figure 2). Consequently, notable families from

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Figure 1. Aerial view of the Husayni cluster in the Shaykh Jarrah neighborhood. Public Domain, Jerusalem Municipality GIS map, online at gisviewer.jerusalem.muni.il/gisviewer/ (accessed 15 August 2017).

Jerusalem purchased uncultivated land beyond the city walls. This law predominantly benefited “new prosperous merchants” from the growing cities of Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa, and Gaza;¹ because of increased safety, land ownership became a profitable investment for such families.² Land acquisition and subsequent development by urban capitalists intensified during drought periods, when cultivation decreased. This phase of urbanization in Palestine remains understudied,³ and yet it provides an important context for understanding the beginnings of the Shaykh Jarrah suburb and its current condition. Unlike other extramural neighborhoods built at the time, such as Mea Shearim and the German Colony, which began as planned immigrant communities, this neighborhood grew incrementally and organically, not following a particular urban plan model.

Like the rest of Jerusalem, Shaykh Jarrah’s recent habitation has been episodically disrupted: by the 1948 and 1967 wars, by the first and second intifada, and most recently



Figure 2. Aerial view of Shaykh Jarrah. Public Domain, American Colony photographic department, 1933, online at www.loc.gov/pictures/item/mpc2010007760/PP/ (accessed 15 August 2017).

by state violence, including home takeovers by ultra-nationalist Israeli settlers and house demolitions by the municipal authorities. Despite this, the neighborhood has remained central in the collective Palestinian memory as a space for the urban affluent imagination and self-representation, a place where wealth was displayed through residential architecture.

During the 1948 war, the receding British troops prevented the Haganah, a Zionist paramilitary organization, from invading Shaykh Jarrah because the area was located on the main evacuation road taken by the remaining British forces.⁴ The unintended result of this was that its inhabitants were able to remain in their homes, a fate not shared by other Palestinian neighborhoods such as nearby Musrara, Talbiya, and al-Baq'a in the western part of Jerusalem, whose inhabitants were forced to flee during the violence; their houses were subsequently confiscated by the state. Although the architecture of such neighborhoods remains, the displacement of their residents resulted in an immediate and permanent separation of the architecture from its cultural and political meaning. A socio-architectural study of Shaykh Jarrah is exceptionally timely precisely because its inhabitants remain and offers an excellent case study for architects and historians to examine questions of architecture and memory preservation. Furthermore, recent activities by Israeli settler organizations, backed by the Israeli state, such as the eviction of the Shamasna family from their home, reveal a neighborhood very much still under threat of ethnic cleansing.⁵



Figure 3. Aerial view of Shaykh Jarrah. Public Domain, American Colony photographic department, 1933, online at www.loc.gov/pictures/item/mpc2010007762/PP/ (accessed 15 August 2017).



Figure 4. Rabah al-Hussayni villa. Public Domain, Matson Photo Service, 1950 to 1977, online at www.loc.gov/pictures/item/mpc2010000210/PP/ (accessed 15 August 2017).

The Husayni Cluster

The push toward building in Shaykh Jarrah came predominantly through the initiative of the Husayni family (figure 3). The Husayni family rose to power in Jerusalem in the early 1700s with the appointment of ‘Abd al-Latif al-Ghudayda as the naqib al-ashraf, followed by the 1780 appointment of Hasan al-Husayni as the mufti of Jerusalem.⁶ Prior to the Ottoman land law, the Husayni family had invested in construction, through *awqaf* or Islamic foundations. In the early eighteenth century, the Husayni family built a fountain, *sabil al-Husayni*, as part of its contribution to the Islamic foundations.⁷

The 1858 land law marked the beginning of the construction of private suburban residences outside of Jerusalem’s walled city. Starting in the 1860s, Rabah al-Husayni, a prominent member of the family, built his villa near the Jarrahi tomb and mosque, with additions in 1876 (figure 4).⁸ This was a foundational moment that began the transformation of the area into an urban residential space. The construction of the house propelled other members of the Husayni family to build houses in the vicinity of Rabah’s mansion, resulting in the term “Husayni neighborhood” often used to refer to the southern part of the Shaykh Jarrah area.

Buildings such as the villas of Rabah al-Husayni, Isma‘il Bey al-Husayni, and Is‘af al-Nashashibi, and Qasr al-Mufti are exemplary monuments to an early twentieth century political class of Palestinians in Jerusalem. The tomb of al-Jarrahi and mosque, formally the architectural anchor of the nearby hills, became secondary to the large houses constructed in its vicinity. Each house remains in some form today. The Rabah al-Husayni villa is the American Colony Hotel and the Isma‘il Bey al-Husayni villa is the now defunct Orient House. The 1930s-era Qasr al-Mufti, the villa of Hajj Amin al-Husayni who was Jerusalem’s mufti at the time, later became the Shepherds’ Hotel. However, in 1967 Israel deemed it “absentee property” and confiscated it. It was later sold to private settlement financiers. In 2011, the building was partially demolished for a housing project for the ultra-religious-nationalist Israeli settler organization Ateret Cohanim.⁹

In addition to their residential purpose, an equally significant part of the villas’ histories is their role as meeting and political spaces for the affluent Palestinian community in Jerusalem. The anchor of this communal function was the 1897 Isma‘il Bey al-Husayni house. It was often vacated to host important diplomatic events. It was also the site of a “tea party” thrown in honor of Kaiser Wilhelm when the German emperor visited Jerusalem in 1889.¹⁰ After 1948, the house became a hotel, “the New Orient House.” Following the 1967 war, the three-level building briefly reopened as a hotel, continued to be used as a Husayni family residence, and housed the Arab Studies Society. During the first intifada the building became known as “the Palestinian national gathering place . . . in Occupied East Jerusalem,” and eventually the PLO headquarters in Jerusalem.¹¹ The house, although designed as a private residence, represented communal and national interests. The Husayni family was after all part of a political ruling class, producing several mayors and muftis.



Figure 5. Sa'ïd al-Husayni house, front façade from the garden. Photo by author, 2014.



Figure 6. Aerial view of the Sa'ïd al-Husayni house with the elongated garden. Public Domain, Jerusalem Municipality GIS map, online at gisviewer.jerusalem.muni.il/gisviewer/ (accessed 15 August 2017)

The Saʿid al-Husayni House

The Saʿid al-Husayni residence, like Orient House, also blurs the distinction between private and public communal uses and architecture. The Saʿid al-Husayni residence, like other Husayni residences, reaffirms the idea of a new beginning in its uniquely complex architectural language: both reference the local (in the use of materials, for instance) and traditional (in aspects of the plan), as well as developing a proto-modern form. An investigation of a single home allows for a closer look at the architectural language of early twentieth-century extramural Palestinian houses in Jerusalem, as well as their significance to the larger political context discussed earlier.

Garden, Building, and Residence

Construction on the Saʿid al-Husayni house began in 1902. Its architecture remains close to its original state, and the structure still functions as a home for the family. As opposed to the study of a house that has been dispossessed or demolished, a study of a “living” house provides us with both a more complete material body of evidence and a continuous lived memory. The Saʿid al-Husayni house stands at the end of an elongated garden lawn. A garden lawn was a configuration new to Jerusalem at the turn of the twentieth century, having been made possible by the newly established safety of that period. Upon entering the property through a modest front gate, one is greeted with a procession of tall pine trees at the end of which the house’s white and pink stone façade appears (figures 5).

To visualize the original context, one needs to imagine the property set atop a rise, the structure in conversation with only a few nearby houses: the Ismaʿil Bey al-Husayni house butting against its western side, and another Husayni house (today a primary and secondary girls’ school and a heritage museum) is situated to the northeast. As Saʿid’s immediate family grew, a new smaller building was added south of the house. The added building housed Saʿid’s grandchildren and eventually their children. The garden linked the two structures and functioned as a shared space for Saʿid’s family; the garden was also accessible to members of the extended family. For Saʿid’s grandchildren, the garden was their playground. When Saʿid and his next-door neighbor, Ismaʿil Bey al-Husayni, a distant relative, resided in the neighborhood, they used a small gate in the wall between their properties to visit each other. Once the two men passed away, the gate was no longer used and was eventually closed off.¹² The garden remained a space of familial interaction and shared activity. It also held a certain symbolic meaning for the family. Saʿid’s grandson, also named Saʿid, planted two olive trees in the garden, one for each of his sons.¹³

The Building

The building’s exquisite architecture reveals the house’s stylistic aspiration as well as its conversation with the other Husayni buildings in Shaykh Jarrah. The two-storied stone façade is composed of three bays. It is an outward looking house with a clear front and back, a modern configuration. The symmetry of the house is broken by an inserted



Figure 7. Sa' id al-Husayni house, front garden. Photo by author, 2014.

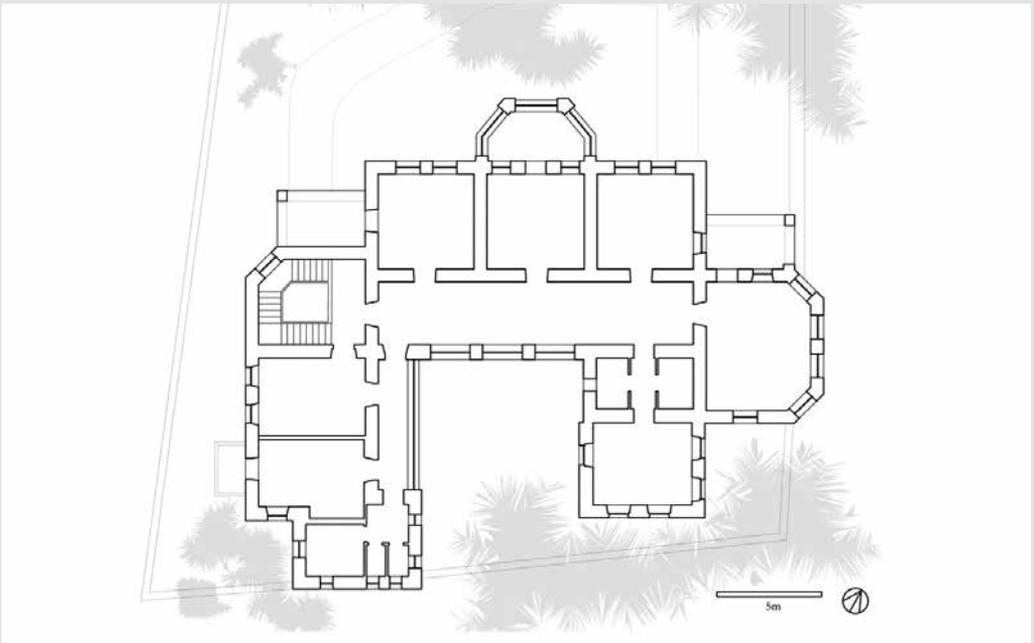


Figure 8. Sa' id al-Husayni house, ground-floor plan. Drawing by author based on plan from Diala Khasawneh, *Memoirs Engraved in Stone: Palestinian Urban Mansions* (Ramallah: Riwaq, 2001).

backyard. The low-pitched roof of the building is similar to that of the Orient House. The roof eaves extend beyond the façades, casting a sharp shadow line, which frames the walls of the house. The use of octagonal shapes in plan in the terrace, staircase, and eastern bedroom is peculiar, and suggests the integration of non-domestic form into a domestic project (figure 8). Octagonal shapes, distinctly Islamic, connote the Dome of the Rock, but also mausoleums, fountains, and kiosks found in cities across the Ottoman domain. On the ground floor, a half-octagonal protrusion from the central bay greets the visitor. This bay was originally an open terrace serving as the main entrance to the residence.¹⁴ Today, the building is accessed from the two side-verandas inset from the main façade (figure 9). Standing in front of the front façade, one turns around the corner, either to the left or right, in order to



Figure 9. Sa'id al-Husayni house, west side entrance under the veranda. Photo by author, 2014.

enter the structure, breaking the experienced axuality imposed by the elongated garden and symmetrical façade. The house's exterior walls are constructed of local pink limestone, similar to the stone used in the Jacir Palace in Bethlehem. The pilasters at the corners of the house are constructed in white limestone – more typical of structures in Jerusalem. On the ground floor, deep window surrounds and segmental arches are also constructed in white limestone. The second floor windows are rectangular, adorned with simple, elegant floral motifs. These floral motifs are the only ornaments on the otherwise minimal geometry of the front façade. Flanking arched verandas emphasize the symmetry of the front façade, each veranda now serving as an entry to the house. Although today the side verandas hold second-story rooms, originally they were open verandas, subordinate to the façade.

The Sa'id al-Husayni house is said to have been designed by a Turkish architect named Kamal Bek.¹⁵ Construction on its first floor began in 1902; its second floor was added later, displaying distinctly different detailing from the first-floor façades. The house as it is experienced today has undergone several alterations over an extended period of time. Following the completion of the second floor, the house effectively functioned as two units: the upper floor accessed through the western veranda and the ground floor accessed through the eastern veranda. Another small gate was even opened in the property's eastern stone wall to function as an access point for the lower unit. Each resident could use a separate gate if needed. Sa'id moved to the upper floor and his brother moved to the ground floor until he eventually resettled in Lebanon, leaving the unit vacant.



Figure 10. Sa'id al-Husayni house, Turkish consulate classroom. Photo by author, 2014.



Figure 11. Sa'id al-Husayni and 'Adala Barakat's living room. Photo by author, 2014.



Figure 12. South-facing hall, second floor. Photo by author, 2014.

Similar to houses discussed previously, the layout of the Husayni house offered an ideal space not only for familial gathering, but also political meetings. In 1936, the house witnessed a meeting between the Arab Higher Committee (a Palestinian political organization formed that year) and the mufti of Jerusalem. Following the meeting, the Arab Higher Committee rented the ground floor of the house from the family, but was soon after banned by the British authorities during the 1936 Arab revolt.¹⁶ The ground floor remained a space rented to tenants, both residents and organizations. After Shaykh Jarrah fell under the rule of the Kingdom of Jordan in 1948, the ground floor was rented to a number of tenants, due to the family's economic hardship following significant land and business loss.¹⁷ The ground unit was first rented to a Jordanian ministry. It then became the home of famed British archeologist Kathleen Kenyon. The space continued to be rented to foreign individuals and institutions up to this day, where it is used as a cultural space and language school by the Turkish Consulate (figure 10). Other secondary alterations were made to the house to accommodate the needs of the different tenants. As mentioned above, a room was added on each of the two verandas on the second floor. Furthermore, the semi-enclosed courtyard was transformed into a large room on the ground floor, providing the upper floor with access to a sun-drenched terrace.

The Residence

The building's upper floor remained the family's living quarter, testifying to the way the space was intended to be used domestically. After Sa'id's time, his son Ibrahim Sa'id al-Husayni and his wife Maliha Tawfiq al-Husayni inherited the upper floor (figure 11). Today it is the residence of Ibrahim Sa'id's son, also named Sa'id, and his wife 'Adala Barakat.

The plan is "U" shaped. The rooms are organized around two spaces: the three-meter-wide main east-west *liwan* or hall and the semi-enclosed courtyard, now a large ground-floor room and upper-floor terrace. The *liwan* connects the north-facing bedrooms, the central sitting room featuring a radio, and two other bedrooms. A *liwan* is analogous to the central space in the traditional courtyard plan, wherein family members lived in rooms that connected only through the courtyard. Like a courtyard, the *liwan* is used as a gathering point. It is south-facing, brightly lit, and is used today as a living and dining area (figure 12). The backyard breaks the symmetry in the plan and ties the guest salon, kitchen, and bathroom in the west wing to the rest of the house. A wide staircase, also on the west wing, leads to the second floor. All bedrooms face either the backyard or the front garden. One can imagine the rooms as always sunny and well ventilated. When Ibrahim Sa'id and Maliha Tawfiq resided in the house, the *liwan* was used as a sitting room. Maliha would eat dinner and watch television in the *liwan*. Once their son Sa'id and his wife 'Adala Barakat inherited the house, the *liwan* was rearranged to accommodate more furniture, a sitting room with an added fireplace, and a working space with a large desk, which Sa'id uses today. 'Adala Barakat diligently attended to the residence.¹⁸ Although the *liwan* functioned as a private space, it was designed with

communal intentions in mind. Ibrahim Husayni, Sa'id's son, recalls stories of when the house was used to gather the entire extended family for discussions of family affairs and national politics. Husayn Bey al-Husayni and Musa al-Husayni each served as Jerusalem's mayor, in 1909 and 1918 respectively. The familial matters of the Husayni family were naturally also public (figure 13).

Conclusion

The house can be understood as a piece in a wider mosaic that illustrates affluent urban Palestinian self-representation through architecture. Each residence in Shaykh Jarrah is a variation of a new architecture type that mimics and mixes known styles and regional tastes, presenting an architectural hybridity that was new to Jerusalem.¹⁹ This hybridity is seen both in the stylistic and functional aspects of the building.

The house is a hybrid between a local vernacular type (courtyard and central communal space) and an early modern type: a front and a back, symmetrical layout, pitched roof, and octagonal shapes. Socially, the house is a hybrid between an expression of communal living (semi-open courtyard, shared garden that is enclosed only symbolically, and *liwan*), combined with an assertion of private familial components (splitting into two units, rooms with distinct uses, different gates and entrances). The plan's layout proved to be versatile. It was adapted for private use as well as institutional purposes. The same room in the different units could act as a bedroom, a meeting room, or a classroom. The spacious *liwan* could function as a living room, a gathering space, or an institutional space.

Preserving Shaykh Jarrah's heritage and its memory plays an important role in imagining a future Jerusalem that does not erase but takes pride in its Palestinian heritage, in other words a Jerusalem that is equitable and pluralistic. Although the narrative of early twentieth-century Shaykh Jarrah exists today merely as an urban ghost, its stories must be preserved as grounding from which to imagine a future for the city where stories, such as the formation of the Husayni cluster, are celebrated.

Given the political climate in today's Jerusalem, preserving the building without its social context is futile if not dangerous. Examples of vacated and reused Palestinian buildings in Jaffa or West Jerusalem come to mind. Additionally, relying solely on memory and oral history, devoid of material evidence (as is often done for the dispossessed Palestinian houses in West Jerusalem) provides an incomplete and reductive story that lacks a material and spatial understanding of Palestinian urban life. The Husayni cluster in Jerusalem, and specifically the Sa'id al-Husayni house, exists as a lived structure and as such its cultural history perseveres alongside its architecture.

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Endnotes

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- 11 “The Orient House,” The Orient House, online at www.orienthouse.org/about/ (accessed 25 October 2016).
- 12 Ibrahim Husayni (journalist, son of Sa‘id Ibrahim al-Husayni) in discussion with author, August 2015.
- 13 Ibrahim Husayni in discussion with author, August 2015.
- 14 Diala Khasawneh, *Memoirs Engraved in Stone: Palestinian Urban Mansions* (Ramallah: Riwaq Center for Architectural Conservation, 1995), 101.
- 15 Khasawneh, *Memoirs Engraved in Stone*, 98. Reliable information on the architect has been difficult to obtain, testifying to a gap in available knowledge on early twentieth century urban architecture in Palestine.
- 16 Khasawneh, *Memoirs Engraved in Stone*, 97.
- 17 Ibrahim Husayni in discussion with author, August 2015.
- 18 Ibrahim Husayni in discussion with author, August 2015.
- 19 My hypothesis on spatial hybridity and integration, noted elsewhere, could be demonstrated by the home’s comparison with other notable family houses in Palestine and its contextualization within contemporary Ottoman architecture elsewhere in the empire, for example, Beirut, Damascus, and Istanbul.