

DERELICT STRUCTURES

Construction, Destruction, and the In-Between: al-Na‘ama Flourmill, Nablus

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Al-Na‘ama Flourmill is significant not only because of its contribution to the modern industrial heritage of Nablus, or its link to the project of modernity, but also its journey from its inception to its tragic recent destruction. The story of the mill reflects a contradiction between the glorious history of its origins as a model of the manufacturing project and the present ignorance of its historical, cultural, and social values, which led to its demolition. Between genesis and destruction, al-Na‘ama Flourmill reveals a significant episode of Nablus city urban life. The construction of the concrete foundation and the import and installation of the machines during the British Mandate are characteristic of an exceptional instance in the manufacturing movement in Nablus. The local and regional networks that came together in this building, forged through the purchase of wheat and the sale of flour – under the control of the British Mandate, the Jordanian government, and the Israeli occupation – are as important as its modernist architectural and industrial values. The abandonment of the building during the 1980s, a result of the Israeli control of the wheat and flour market, its later destruction in 2015, and the current use of the building’s land as a parking lot are revealing of the city’s urban politics and transformations.

This paper aims to contextualize the flourmill for the reader and situate its specific typology in time and space. Based on archival research, local narratives, and memories, a reconstruction of the birth, life, and death of the mill will restore its image for the reader, articulate the urban and cultural transformations of Nablus, and reflect on the concept of heritage. This exploration will be presented in a progression of three scenes of the flourmill: construction, destruction, and the in-between.

Construction

Historically, Nablus played a major role in interregional and intraregional trade in Palestine. “The narrow valley which bisects the central highlands and connects the desert with the fertile western plains was a natural corridor for goods heading in all four directions.”¹ Nablus was Palestine’s principal trade and manufacturing center during the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries, its economic and social life sustained by and organized around four main commodities of Jabal Nablus: cotton, textiles, olive oil, and soap. After the mid-nineteenth century, cotton cultivation has declined. The British demand for grains caused a shift in the percentage of land allocated for this purpose. Palestinian peasants welcomed this change, preferring to grow grains, as “there was always a local and regional market for wheat whereas cotton was vulnerable to international price fluctuations and to the health of regional textile industries.”² At that time, local grain mills produced flour for the city.³ The increase in wheat crops paved the way for the establishment of a new, modern flourmill during the third decade of the twentieth century.

According to Emad al-Masri, one of the heirs of the mill’s founders, the flourmill was established in 1923 or 1924, during the British colonial period. The Masri family and their business partners the Aloul (‘Alul) family decided to establish al-Na‘ama Flourmill Company,⁴ with the Masri family owning six of nine shares, and the Aloul family owning the remaining three shares. According to Emad al-Masri, the milling machines were bought from a well-known Swiss company called the Bühler Group; this company also installed the machines and set up the mill for operation. Al-Na‘ama Flourmill was one of the first mills that this company had installed worldwide. Thafir al-Masri, Emad al-Masri recalled, gave the original drawings of the mill, which were drawn on textile, to the Swiss company as a gift. The mill’s founding shaped a significant chapter in the social history and the economic development of Nablus during the 1920s. The mill was one of al-Hajj Tahir al-Masri’s company projects, which also included a number of factories and investments, including a matchbox factory, gas stations, and an oil factory. These manufacturing projects affected urban life and contributed to socio-economic changes in the community that allowed Nablus to remain a vital point on the economic and commercial map of Palestine, even after the decline in the cotton and textile trade.

The foundation of the flourmill was connected to the industrial and economic development that Palestine witnessed during the British Mandate. This development was a result of the funding that came through Europe to support Jewish immigration to Palestine. As well as the induction of industry during the wartime in order to sustain a regional provision to provide the army with supplies and equipment bearing in mind that Palestine was the empire’s second largest military base in the Middle East after Egypt.⁵ During World War II, trading and industrial ventures further expanded, but “Arab capital growth was small in comparison to the rapid growth of the Jewish manufacturing during the Mandate, which went from generating 50 percent of Palestine’s output in the 1920s to 60 percent in the early 1930s and reached 80 percent during the wartime induced industrialization.”⁶ In the milling industry, in conjunction with the establishment of al-Na‘ama Flourmill in Nablus, important modern flourmills were built in Tel Aviv (Modern

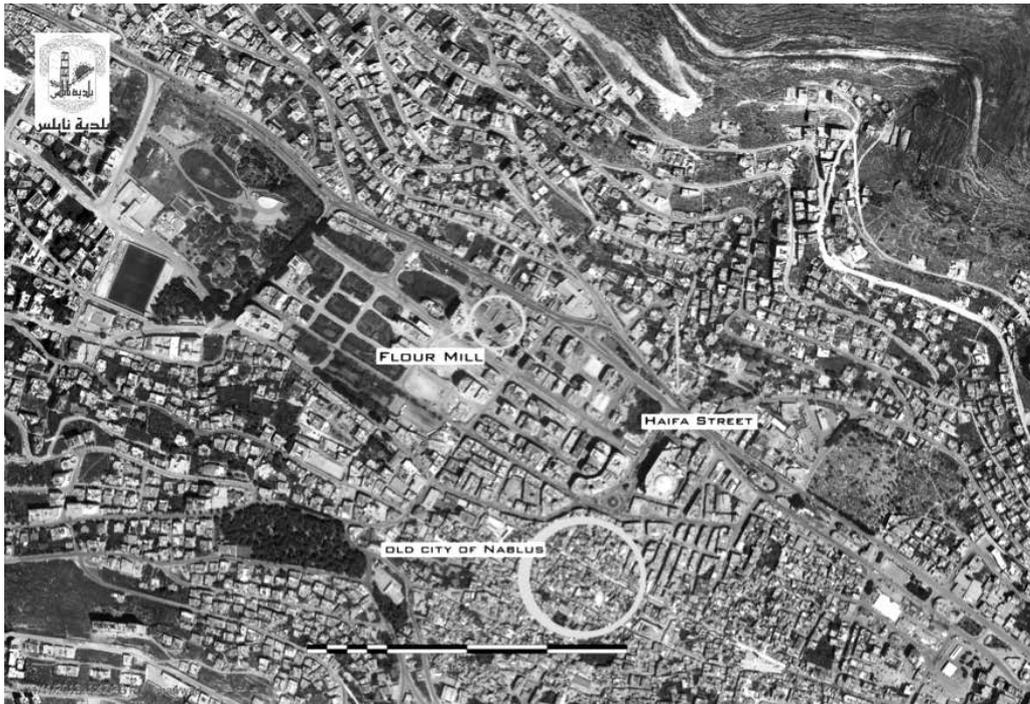


Figure 1. An aerial photo of Nablus showing the location of al-Na‘ama Flourmill on Haifa Street to the west of the Old City of Nablus. Source: Nablus Municipality.

Flourmill) and Haifa (the Grand Moulins, established in 1921 with support from Baron de Rothschild). These two mills controlled the flour market, having secured a virtual monopoly. The Mandate government imported Australian wheat and applied a permit system that defined the import amount and the ration of each flourmill, dramatically affecting the amount of flour and its price.⁷

Al-Na‘ama Flourmill was erected on 2,450 square meters on the western periphery of Nablus, on Haifa Street, which connects Nablus and Tulkarm. This location made the mill accessible for the trucks that transported wheat from other parts of Palestine and Jordan (figure 1). Emad al-Masri explained that the flourmill formed an important landmark, which contributed to the surrounding area’s urban character. The locals started to refer to the entire area as the flourmill area (*al-mathana*). Moreover, the establishment of the flourmill encouraged other investors to launch commercial and industrial developments in the area; in particular, al-Tamimi Gas Station was constructed opposite the mill and an ice factory was constructed next to the mill and later transformed into al-Arz Ice Cream Factory.⁸ At that time, the city of Nablus was not connected to the public electricity network and generators were used to provide the mill with electricity.⁹ The generators and the machines were so loud that their sound reached even those in the city living far from the mill. This was among the reasons for the delay of residential expansion toward the area.

According to Mahmoud Qatouni – who worked in the mill from 1956 until its demolition – the mill’s main building was a fifteen-meter tall, yellow, rectangular concrete structure, which contained the milling machines. In addition to the main building,



Figure 2. A general view of al-Na'ama Flourmill from the west, showing the stores and large piles of grain in the yard, 12 June 1940, from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



Figure 3. A general view inside the mill showing machines on one of the upper floors, 1940, from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

warehouses were connected to the western side of the building and opened onto a large yard that was used as a loading area for wheat and flour (figure 2). The mill's inner space was divided into five different levels by iron beams that were covered with wooden pallets (figure 3). The production process started at the highest level and began with sieving, followed by washing, drying, grinding, and, finally, sorting and packing on the ground level. Later, another floor was added to the building, increasing its height to eighteen meters. At that time, the flourmill was the highest building in the city. The yellow concrete block made an impression on locals and made the mill an extraordinary structure that was valued by the inhabitants of Nablus.

The In-Between

When the flourmill started operating in the 1920s, Hassan al-Aloul was the principal of the mill. Mazouz al-Masri was responsible for the oil factory and used to pass by every evening to take care of the family business.

Hassan al-Aloul and Mazouz al-Masri had

no office; instead, they used to sit at the street side in front of the mill to socialize with friends and to discuss their business. The operation manager was a Greek technician called Abu Hanna who lived and died in Nablus. After Abu Hanna's death, his son took responsibility for managing the flourmill and he also stayed in Palestine until his death.

The production capacity was twenty-five to thirty tons per day and the flour was produced in three categories: extra, first-class, and second-class. According to Emad al-Masri and Qatouni, the flour was sold to merchants in Nablus and other Palestinian cities and villages. The mill used to deliver flour for tradesmen in Nablus by donkey – *jahsh al-mathana* (the mill's donkey), as locals used to say – for convenient navigation through the narrow city passages, while the flour was transported by trucks to the other cities.

Enduring Nablus historical position as a main hub of local and regional trade network, the flourmill company used to purchase wheat from the peasants in all parts of Palestine, and from Irbid and Amman in Jordan. In order to cover the flourmill needs for wheat and due to the high demand for flour, the company used to import wheat from the United States through the Aqaba port. Mahmoud Qatouni said workers used to leave Nablus in

the morning going to Amman in order to spend their night, then continued their way to Aqaba, where they would receive ships coming from the United States, offload the wheat, and transfer it to Nablus the following day. This journey was difficult for the drivers since the roads between Amman and Aqaba were unpaved.

In 1948, after the Nakba and the Israeli occupation for Palestine, the noise of the flourmill was the only sound hitting the silence of Nablus nights, according to Emad al-Masri, “the inhabitants used to say: the Masris are making money.” The mill was working twenty-four hours a day and its sound was so loud that inhabitants of Nablus used to hear it from ‘Ibal Mountain (Northern Mountain). Despite the din, which (as mentioned above) had hindered the residential development of the area near the mill, people started to build and settle in the area in the second half of the twentieth century, after which many residential and commercial blocks were erected and connected the mill with the city’s fabric.

Qatouni added that two flourmills were working in Palestine during the Jordanian period: Al-Na‘ama Flourmill and another smaller mill in Qalandiya, near Jerusalem, called al-Jallad Flourmill. The flour supply was not enough to cover the demand of the local market, especially after the Nakba and the increase in the population due to the influx of refugees from the occupied Palestinian cities. Thus, the flour merchants used to buy flour from Jordan, since there were four flourmills in Amman and Irbid. Ironically, as a consequence of the Nakba, the Palestinian refugees received wheat as part of the food aid provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and many of them sold it to the flourmill.

After the Israeli occupation for the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, al-Na‘ama Flourmill struggled to survive. Emad al-Masri noted that the mill faced difficulties due to out-of-date machines, unavailability of wheat, and competition with the modern flourmill in Haifa (the Grand Moulins), which produced flour in larger quantities and at lower prices.¹⁰ Further, the mill was required to import wheat through the ports controlled by the Israeli occupation, since it was no longer possible to import through Aqaba port or to buy wheat from the Jordanian tradesman as before. Al-Na‘ama Flourmill Company managed to keep working until the late 1980s. Emad al-Masri unemotionally described the last day in the flourmill when Qatouni emptied the safe and brought the files and keys to his office. In the 1980s, the Masri and Aloul families tried to sustain their business by establishing a new flourmill outside the city. They again contacted the Swiss Bühler Group and asked them to prepare a cost-benefit analysis: according to Emad al-Masri, the cost was estimated between three and four million dollars, and they thus regretted the project.

The desertion of the mill made it a scary place. Several decades later, however, artists and architects came together in the 2011 Nablus exhibition *Ma bayna ‘Ibal wa Jarazim* (Between Ebal and Gerzim), the third in a series of exhibitions focusing on different Palestinian cities, to highlight the importance of the industrial structure.¹¹ As part of this exhibition, Nabil Anani and Suleiman Mansour created an installation in the flourmill called “On the Mill, I Saw You on the Mill.” The intervention aimed to investigate the social history of the mill based on material found in the archives of the Nablus municipality and other official institutions. At that exhibition, the flourmill was opened and many

artists, students, and members of the public visited the place. The exhibition contributed to returning forgotten spaces to the collective memory of the citizens of Nablus and Palestinians from other cities. It was the first time that many of the students, professors, and locals had visited the mill. This visit left its impact on the group perception of the space and was one of the reasons that researchers and students became enthusiastic to write about and investigate the flourmill.

Destruction

The dramatic post-Oslo rise in land prices encouraged the Masri and Aloul families to sell the mill's land to four investors from Nablus and the surrounding villages. Emad al-Masri and Waleed al-Aloul represented the two families in the business deal. In 2012, the landowners applied for a demolition permit, following the Palestinian law that was announced in 2006. The law states that the demolition of any building older than fifty years should be approved by the ministry of tourism and antiquities. However, Palestinian law in the West Bank, based on the Jordanian law from 1966, defines cultural heritage as:

1. Any unmovable historical evidence, that was structured, formed, builds, produced or modified by man before 1700 CE, including any addition or rebuilt after that date.
2. Anthropological and animal remains dated to 600 CE and before.
3. Any unmovable or movable evidence dated after 1700 CE, but nominated by the minister as historical evidence.¹²

As a consequence of this frozen and out-of-date cultural heritage law, and after the department of antiquities team examination of the building and the lot on which it sits, the demolition process was approved in 2013. Although an old well, a water channel, and an old milling machine were found, Mahmoud al-Birawi, head of the department of antiquities in Nablus, said that no traces of older structures were found and the concrete structure had no architectural value. Emad al-Masri said that the demolition was approved because the structure has no floors and thus was not considered a building that could convey historical or architectural value. The department of antiquities placed one condition on the demolition: that the well and a part of the old milling machine be preserved and any new architectural design should place the machine in a glass box in front or inside the proposed building as a remembrance of the site.¹³

After receiving the demolition permit from the municipality, the investors paid two million dollars in insurance to the municipality and al-Na'ama Flourmill was demolished in November 2015. The mill's destruction provoked public reaction, including the organization by a local initiative of a day of documentation of the site. Many people went to visit the place before the demolition, photographers documented the site, journalists prepared reports for the local media blaming the municipality and the department of antiquities for this loss of heritage, but no one stopped the demolition process. For Qatouni,

the destruction was a big loss: the mill was a success story that held a lot of memories, and it was a pity to lose this history.

The demolition process was cruel; the mill's machinery was left inside, crushed, and sold afterward as scrap. The investors did not comply with the conditions put forward by the municipality and the department of antiquities, namely preserving the old wooden milling machine (figure 4), and as a result they lost the insurance money they had paid to the municipality.

Issam Abu Zaid, the manager of the Nablus chamber of commerce and industry, said that the deserted flourmill was responsible for health problems in the area because wheat remnants provided a shelter for pests and vermin and the space ultimately became a junkyard. The chamber of commerce and industry supported the demolition as investment and a project that could be part of the economic development process. The investors' first plan was to erect a shopping center, a typical post-Oslo proposal; however, the project was suspended and the investors are still conducting business studies to decide the future of the project. Currently, the location of the mill is used as a paid parking lot (figure 5).

The Flourmill's Journey and the Notion of Heritage

The journey of al-Na'ama Flourmill from construction to destruction is not only an example that articulates the urban and cultural transformations of Nablus, it also highlights the concept of heritage within a "post-colonial" society. When revisiting social media and the locals' comments on the demolition of the flourmill in November 2015, two distinct main viewpoints emerge (see, for example, figure 6). One agreed with the municipality and the chamber of commerce and industry and supported the demolition of the flourmill.



Figure 4. A general view of the inner space of al-Na'ama Flourmill showing the wooden machine during the annual cities exhibition, 2011. Photo by Lana Joudeh.



Figure 5. A general view of the empty location of the destroyed mill, now used as a parking area. Photo by the authors.



Figure 6. A selection of citizens' social media comments on the demolition of the flourmill, November 2015.

This group's viewpoint confirmed that there is an essential need for economic development in the city that overrides the protection of an old, deserted concrete building. People highlighted that the building was not (and should not be) considered a cultural heritage, with one comment on Facebook stating: "the building is not considered heritage, it doesn't contain arches and it is not built from stones." Further, this group considered the flourmill a symbol of oppression and related it to the British colonial era. Many of the comments explained that "you want to protect a symbol of colonialism and oppression," and another commenter marveled that "the building was not destroyed by the Israeli army."

The other group was depressed by the demolition and rejected the municipality's agreement to the destruction. They considered the building an important landmark in the city, a part of its social history, and a cultural heritage site that should be conserved and rehabilitated. An extraordinary comment went so far as to claim that "this building is the pyramid of Nablus," trying to explain the importance of the building for the locals. This group's comments reflected nostalgic views, but by and large it did not take any action to protest or prevent the demolition.

Considering the first position on the flourmill demolition, it seems contradictory that locals would support the demolition because they considered the mill a symbol of oppression and colonialism, while at the same time supporting the call for initiating a consumerist shopping center that will colonize their everyday space. The demolition of the flourmill represents a typical example of neoliberal urban restructuring and emerging forms of spatial ordering and engineering in the post-Oslo regime, which includes

shopping centers, business towers, and high-end gated residential neighborhoods.

The locals' perceptions and attitudes toward the demolition of the flourmill emphasized that the diversity of viewpoints are linked to the socio-political transformations witnessed by the city and the area. Impacted by various colonial powers that controlled Palestine and in order to protect their existence, Palestinians defined their cultural identity based on primordial identity, concentrating on religious and ancient origins and neglecting their modern history. Nablus's beginnings go back to the Canaanite period, its architecture and urban development can be traced back to the Roman, Byzantine, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods, making it a very rich space. As a result, municipality conservation policies focus on the historical Old City and Roman archeological sites and ignore local modern heritage like cinemas, schools, coffee houses, hospitals, and factories. Modern heritage features are located outside the historical Old City; consequently they are not included in Orientalist academic definition of Arab-Islamic city.¹⁴

The demolition of the flourmill underlined the notion that the concept of heritage is confined to the classical, religious, and ancient monuments (Umayyad and Mamluk in Palestine, Pharaonic in Egypt, Nabataean in Jordan, Phoenician in Lebanon, and so on).¹⁵ It is evident that the Orientalist definition of the Islamic and Arabic city excluded local urban heritage and this definition is reflected in the heritage law and other regulations based on Jordanian laws that originate in British Mandate law. The institutional system, including the laws and regulations, the system of governance, and the education system have paved the way for a *tabula rasa* project, which provides promises for a prosperous future and neglects the recent past and the heritage of modernity. Activities of heritage conservation have necessarily been reframed according to the political, cultural, and economic realities of the present, as well as the attitudes of various stakeholders toward modernity, national identity, and authenticity. Yasser Elsheshtawy has qualified such an approach as "outdated and counterproductive," leading to "a narrative of loss."¹⁶

Presently, the land on which al-Na'ama Flourmill used to sit is used as a parking lot, while the mill's scenery is still embedded in the mental image of the locals who lived the construction, destruction, and the in-between. In Nablus, it is still typical to say that something is "near the flourmill [*al-mathana*]" or "on the flourmill street [*shari' al-mathana*]," maintaining the memory of this place that witnessed the changes throughout the modern history of Nablus. Although no flourmill is there, maybe the future generations will ask: where is the flourmill you are talking about? The power of its absence could be regained in reminiscing.

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Endnotes

- 1 Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 23.
- 2 Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*, 105.
- 3 Doumani mentions, for example, a flourmill in Wadi al-Tuffah owned by Hajj Ibrahim Muhammad Anabtawi, originally a wealthy peasant from ‘Anabta, and the ‘Abd al-Hadis. Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*, 303 (note 115).
- 4 Al-Na‘ama means soft in Arabic, and the Masri family had previously used this name as a brand for its soap factory.
- 5 Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 2.
- 6 Seikaly, *Men of Capital*, 14.
- 7 See, for example: “Wheat & Wheat-Flour Supplies and Prices,” Government of Palestine Controller of Supplies Office, 1939, Israel State Archives 4318/5-M, online at www.archives.gov.il/archives/#!/Archive/0b07170680031eca/File/0b07170680be940c (accessed 27 January 2017).
- 8 This factory was also demolished along with the flourmill.
- 9 Nablus was connected to a public electrical network in the 1959. See Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem (ARIJ), *Nablus City Profile* (Jerusalem: ARIJ, 2014), online at vprofile.arij.org/nablus/pdfs/vprofile/Nablus%20city_vp_en.pdf (accessed 27 January 2017).
- 10 “The Grand Mills of Israel,” Central Zionist Archives website, n.d., online at www.zionistarchives.org.il/en/Pages/GrandMills.aspx (accessed 15 January 2017).
- 11 For more information on the exhibition, see: “The Third Annual Cities Exhibition ‘Between Ebal and Gerzim,’” Birzeit University Museum website, n.d. (2011), online at museum.birzeit.edu/exhibitions/third-annual-cities-exhibition-between-ebal-and-gerzim (accessed 26 January 2017).
- 12 The text of the original Jordanian law is available online at www.riswaq.org/riwaq/sites/default/files/pdfs/1966%20ANTIQUITIES%20LAW%20.pdf (accessed 25 January 2017). The Palestinian Authority has been working with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to develop a new cultural heritage law, but it remains in draft form: see “Palestinian Cultural Heritage Law,” UNESCO website, n.d., online at www.unesco.org/new/en/ramallah/culture/institutional-development/cultural-policies-and-planning/palestinian-cultural-heritage-law/ (accessed 27 January 2017).
- 13 Malak Abu ‘Aysha, “Mathanat Nablus . . . irth banahi al-ajdad wa hadmihi al-ahfad” [The Nablus Mill . . . A Legacy of Forefathers’ Construction and Grandchildren’s Destruction,” *Raya*, 21 November 2015, online at www.raya.ps/ar/news/925954.html (accessed 15 January 2017).
- 14 According to Janet Abu-Lughod, the definition of Arab-Islamic cities was built on limited examples, mainly Fez in Morocco and Damascus and Aleppo in Syria. Janet Abu-Lughod, “The Islamic City, Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987): 155–176.
- 15 In her study on Amman, Renate Dieterich investigates Orientalist models and highlighted the marginalization of Amman’s distinctive urban features – such as the Husayni mosque, coffee houses, the cemetery at Ras al-‘Ayn, among others – in a case similar to the marginalization of Nablus’s urban features. Renate Dieterich, “What is ‘Islamic’ about the City of Amman?” paper submitted to the conference “Conservation and Regeneration of Traditional Urban Centers in the Islamic World: Learning from Regional Experiences and Building Partnerships,” in Amman, Irbid, and Salt, 2002.
- 16 Yasser Elsheshtawy, “The Middle East City: Moving beyond the Narrative of Loss,” in *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, ed. Yasser Elsheshtawy (London: Routledge, 2004), 3, 5.