

## ARCHITECTURAL AND DECORATIVE ELEMENTS IN TRADITIONAL PALESTINIAN HOUSES

Mumen Abuarkub \*

Isra University, Amman, Jordan

**Abstract.** It is difficult to frame the Palestinian traditional architecture within a unified artistic style. However, there is a kind of statistics in the details and aesthetic style of implementation, in spite of the existence of this variety in the nature of the decorative elements that vary in different houses and eras. Furthermore, if anyone pauses in front of any Palestinian house and takes a glance at it, the sight reflects a simple and special sensation and emotion. Despite the general similarity in the pattern of construction and decoration in Palestine, each city has a specific artistic style, which was born and developed there. The style varies among different cities and it often emerges from the immediate environment like the geographical location, the social structure in Palestine, family legacy and religion. However, there is a common aesthetic language among buildings. It summarizes the harmonious formatting of architectural units and distributes them at the buildings' façade to balance between the openings consisting of the main door, windows and balconies. This paper presents a very important study of the elaboration of architectural decorative elements of a Palestinian traditional house because of that architecture is threatening various dangers of not storing and losing. This work will also serve a variety of researchers and research centers in Palestine and abroad for further research. The aim of this study is to contribute to raising the level of Palestinian urban architecture and the level of awareness of the local community towards it by establishing clear features of the architectural identity in Palestine, identifying, documenting and analyzing all the architectural styles in the traditional residential buildings in Palestine. This is accomplished without compromising its heritage value. Creating an atmosphere of communication between architects. In general, the main objectives of this study are to educate the population about the importance of the Palestinian cultural heritage and preserve and maintain them by improving the living conditions of the residents of the old town.

**Keywords:** *decorative elements, Palestinian traditional house, urban architecture, Palestinian cultural heritage.*

**Corresponding Author:** Mumen Abuarkub, Prof. Dr., Isra University, Amman, Jordan,  
e-mail: [mumen.abuarkub@iu.edu.jo](mailto:mumen.abuarkub@iu.edu.jo)

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### 1. Introduction

If the readers want to define the beauty of the traditional architecture in Palestine, especially the building which was built at the beginning of the twentieth century until the forties, they have to take a closer look at the art and decorative elements and study the characteristics of forms and material of this architecture. It is difficult to frame the Palestinian traditional architecture within a unified artistic style. However, the reader notes that there is a kind of statistics in the details and aesthetic style of implementation, in spite of the existence of this variety in the nature of the decorative elements that vary in different houses and eras. The readers find out that all traditional buildings in Palestine become unified in this unique beauty, it could be emotional more than physical. Furthermore, if anyone stops in front of any Palestinian house and takes a glance at it, the sight reflects a simple and special sensation and emotion. The style in

general is accurate, clear and without affectation. The nature of this house belongs to the garden of grapes, figs and olives which is very close to the soul of this house.

Despite the general similarity in the pattern of construction and decoration in Palestine, each city has a specific artistic style which was born and developed there. The style varies among different cities and it often emerges from the immediate environment like the geographical location, the social structure in Palestine, family legacy and religion. This could be clearly seen for example in many religious symbols on the swaddle of the door or the key, such as the cross or blessing phrases inspired by the Koran or the Bible.

The construction process for the owner was an individual process which reflected the privacy of his personal style and his personality. However, there is a common aesthetic language among buildings that summarizes the harmonious formatting of architectural units and distributes them at the building's façade to find out a balance between the openings consisting of the main door, windows and balconies. The arrangements usually depend on a central system, so that the entrance would appear with certainty in the center of the building, surrounded by a numbers of windows in the rhythm of beautiful symmetry between the two sides.

Other crafts which come with the construction process like the carpentry and tiling are not less significant in the decoration of the stone house.

## 2. Arches

The arches, in general, played the main role in highlighting the importance of the house façade thus specifying the entrance and centrality in relation to the rest of the building. The attention of the arches as a form of decoration and the art of the stone carver (*Dkeek Al-Hajar*) who makes them in different forms, results in a variety of arches on the facade of the Palestinian house.

The arches are distinguished in different forms and colors and became a fertile ground for decorative work that can be seen on each stone of the arch.

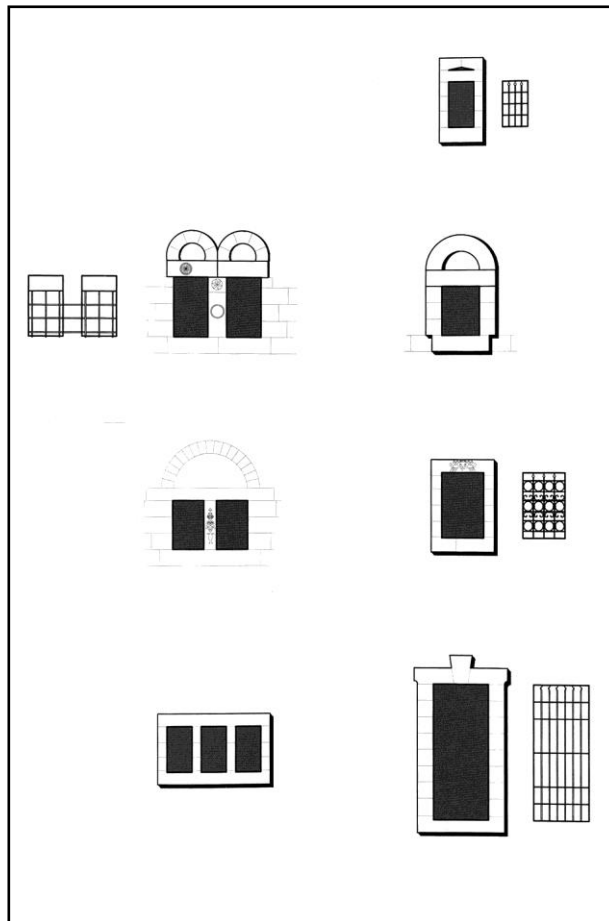
There is no doubt that the color of the stone and its accuracy were not the basic element of the decoration. The essential element in the decoration was the arch shape and its genesis. The arch could be executed in several ways: it could be down; it could appear on the façade or it could offer rain protection. The arches linked the façade to the wide coastal road (*Cornishat*). These openings were executed by semi circular arches and circular windows in several homes in Palestine. A distinctive feature of those arches was the triple form of the doors. The doors had arch rectangular slot in the top and on the sides there were two thin rectangular windows. There were arches on those two windows to make three arches together with the one of the door. The range of this window to the arch of the door was 1:2 approximately. There are several executions of those arches: sometimes it was a simple form like a stone, another one a complicated pillow or a combination.

The arch stones have presented a fertile environment for decorative work by drilling and graving different types of writings, religious drawings, plants and animals or a mix combination of these decorative shapes. These decorations appeared in several shapes. The interior door opening, specially (*Al-Allaly*) door, has been characterized with decorations worth considering. The arch doors are characterized with beautiful engraved stones. The most widely used decoration was the eightfold star or sixfold and spiral shape. The plane symbolized the length of life and the spike of wheat symbolized the good in life.

The door stone comes in different forms such as a stone based on the two sides of the door or the stone as a straight arch which consists of many pieces of stones involved in one center.

Furthermore, the vertical stone appeared in the thirties dominating until today, despite the use of the multi straight stone or the (*Swakeef*) which has one piece. The stone reveals to the visitors the owners personal identify or religious identity (Issa & Judeh, 2014)<sup>1</sup>.

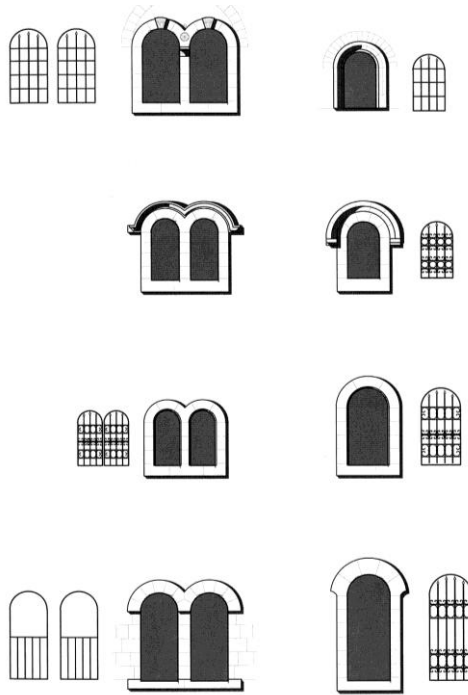
Another reason for the use of these decorations is putting a sign or words which linked the owner of the house with God, requested blessing and God's protection. These decorations include crucifix as well as quotations from the Koran or the Bible, or religious praise. It is rare to see a house without these codes. It must be pointed out that these religious codes were primarily used in the religious buildings, and afterwards were applied in residential buildings in Palestine.



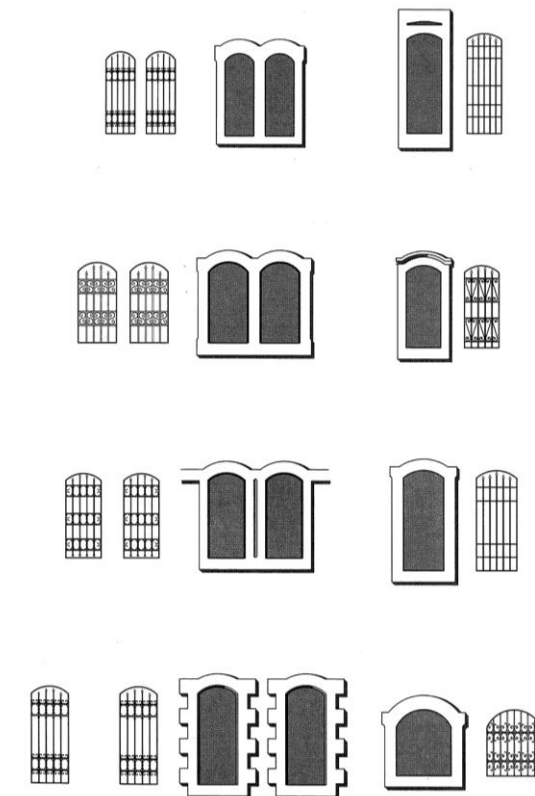
**Figure 1.** Examples of straight windows in residential buildings in Palestine<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Issa and Judeh, 2014: 166 [Arabic]

<sup>2</sup> Issa and Judeh, 2014: 177 [Arabic]



**Figure 2.** Examples of circular arch windows in residential buildings in Palestine<sup>3</sup>

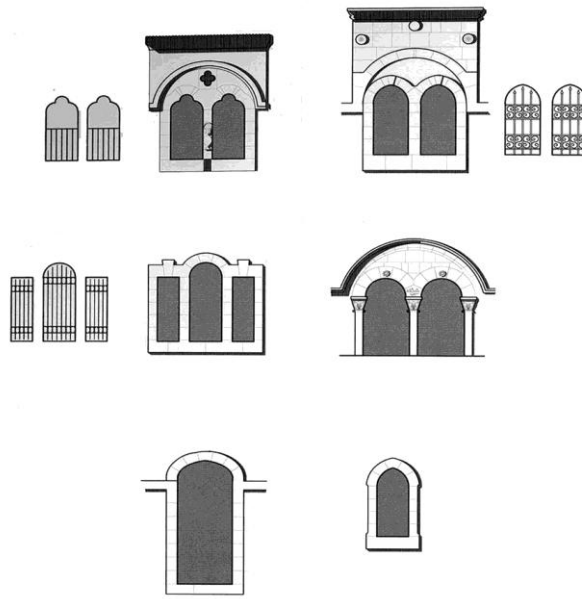


**Figure 3.** Examples of curved arch windows in residential buildings in Palestine<sup>4</sup>

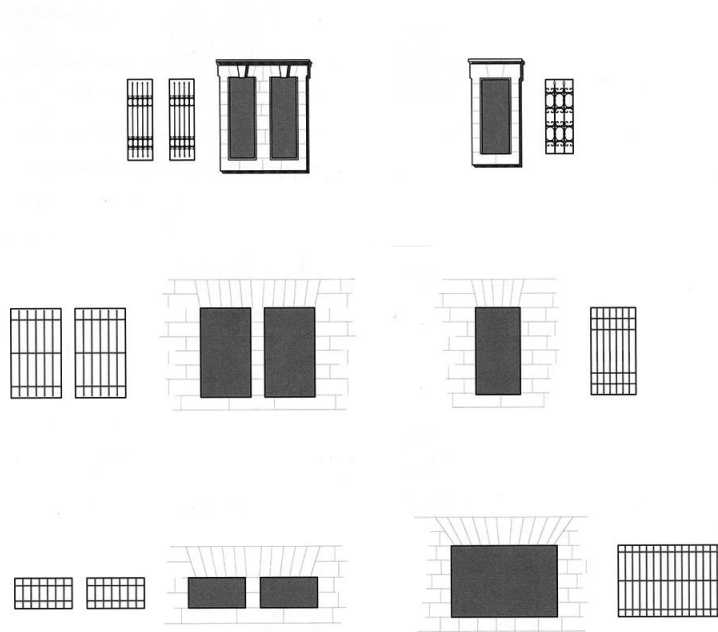
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<sup>3</sup> Issa and Judeh, 2014: 177 [Arabic]

<sup>4</sup> Issa and Judeh, 2014: 177 [Arabic]



**Figure 4.** Examples of windows straight clamping in residential buildings in Palestine<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 5.** Examples of unique windows in residential buildings in Palestine<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Issa and Judeh, 2014: 177 [Arabic]

<sup>6</sup> Issa and Judeh, 2014: 177 [Arabic]



**Photo 1.** Formations arches on the windows in Yakoub El-Zarour house in Ramallah<sup>7</sup>



**Photo 2.** Formations arches on the external windows in Qaraman house in Haifa<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Jubeh and Bshara, 2002: 230 [Arabic]

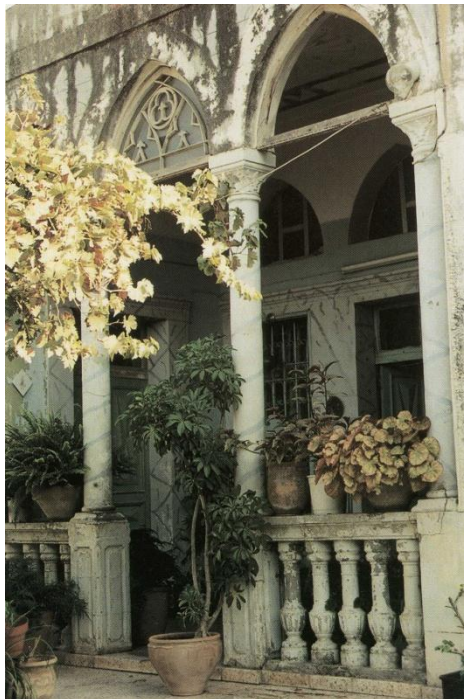
<sup>8</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 54, Photographs: Gröndahl



**Photo 3.** External arches in Qlaybo house in Jerusalem<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Porches with columns**

The porches with columns and decoration crowns which come in the middle of the central façade are used to show the importance of this entrance, to get the viewer's attraction to the elements of wealth in the Palestinian traditional house and to give a view of the gardens which have extended to the house.



**Photo 4.** Vestibule with columns in Sabe house in Qalqeeliyeh<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 107, Photographs: Gröndahl

<sup>10</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 138, Photographs: Gröndahl



**Photo 5.** Different types of stone carving from the unique trefoil entrance arches in Palestine<sup>11</sup>



**Photo 6.** The five-arched with its main entrance, a typical treatment to a main facade in Khouri house in Jaffa<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Jubeh and Bshara. 2002: 254 [Arabic]

<sup>12</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 75, Photographs: Gröndahl



These porches are actually balconies used as an entry into the house. In all cases the arches are characterized by the white stone. These balconies come in a variety of forms: some are semi-circular; others in a form of a horseshoe and the third are straight consisting of several parts-the base, the column, the crown and the cover. The base had a little decoration of plants. It is actually one piece of square stone, to increase the height of the column. The carver (*Dkeek Al-Hajar*) focuses on the crown with a variety of decorations: religious, plant decoration, grapes or leaves etc.

#### 4. Iron protection and metal doors

Protecting and preserving the home from strangers has been high priority for the Palestinians for ages. It may be historically perceived that iron is the hardest, more robust material that provides the necessary protection. However, Palestinian history has witnessed multiple doors manufacturing techniques and diversity of materials that make the doors fancy. Iron sheet was used in the manufacture of protection windows and metal doors. Blacksmithing was performed in a traditional way by: knocking, pulling, (*Sanbaka*).



**Photo 7.** Iron protection on stairs in Shamma house in Safad<sup>13</sup>

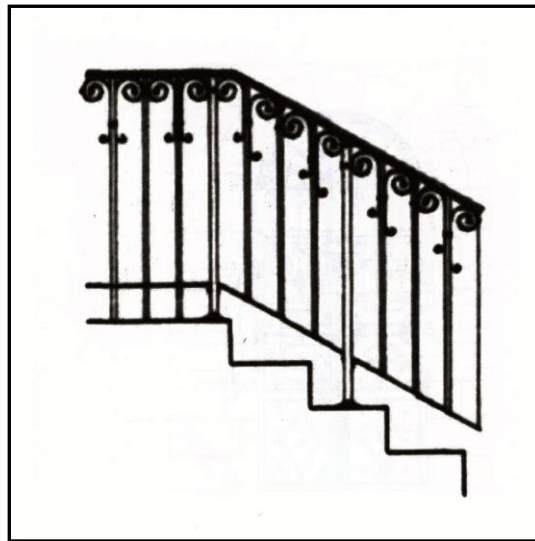
Iron protection has sophisticated forms, used to integrate the decorative forms with the iron rod in a circle shape O, oval shape, S shape and L shape. Combinations of these shapes can be applied in a single door. These decorations were made of 4 millimeter iron sheet and a 16 millimeters high iron rod. The banister of the balconies

<sup>13</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 152, Photographs: Gröndahl

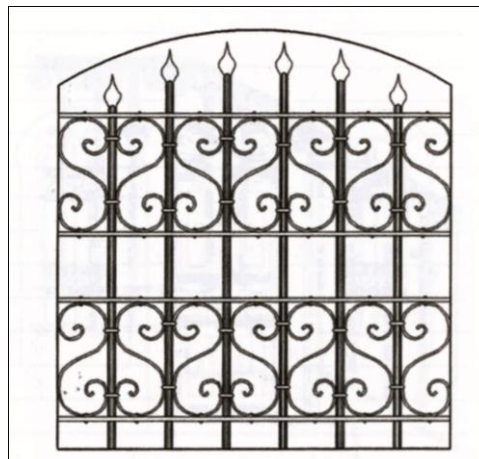
and the banister of internal and external stairs were made of circular iron rod or square iron rod in the diameter of 16 millimeters covered from the top to the bottom with 8 millimeters iron sheet. There was a small opening on the iron door, adorned with a soft decorative iron sheet that let light through the (*Mbazzar*) glass<sup>14</sup>.

The doors were made of two thick iron leaves with a thickness more than three millimeters. These doors were decorated with plant decorations such as a flower with six or eight circular or oval leaves.

A distinctive feature in door decorations was the endless forms of the leaves and the (bell) which is the iron hand that the visitors use to knock the door. It comes in different forms like a (ring) or a simple circular form.



**Figure 6.** Detail of the fence around the rocks in Ramallah<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 7.** Types of iron protection for windows in Palestine<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Al-Jubeh and Bshara, 2002: 258-260 [Arabic]

<sup>15</sup> Al-Jubeh and Bshara, 2002: 262 [Arabic]

<sup>16</sup> Al-Jubeh and Bshara, 2002: 264 [Arabic]

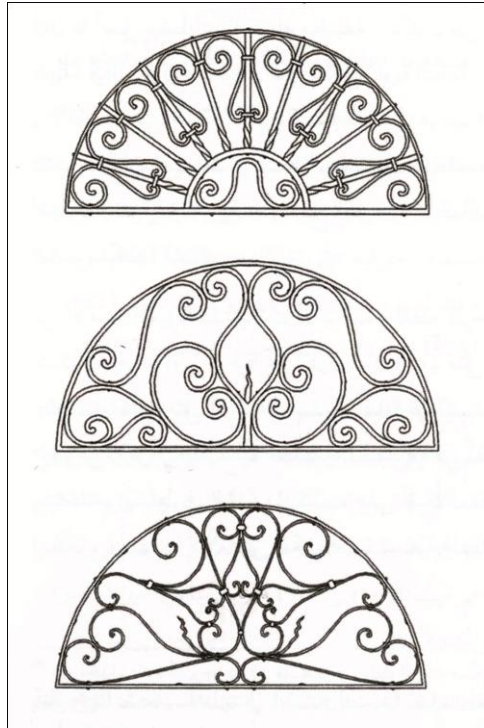


Figure 8. Types of iron protection for windows in Palestine<sup>17</sup>

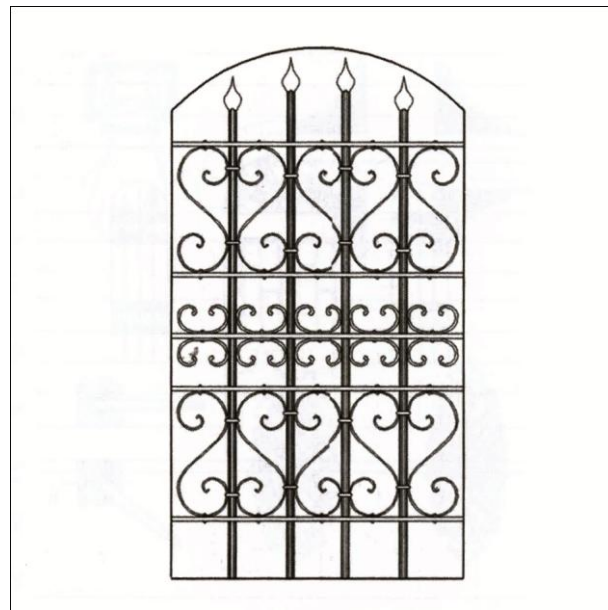


Figure 9. Types of iron protection for windows in Palestine<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Al-Jubeih and Bshara, 2002: 264 [Arabic]

<sup>18</sup> Al-Jubeih and Bshara, 2002: 264 [Arabic]

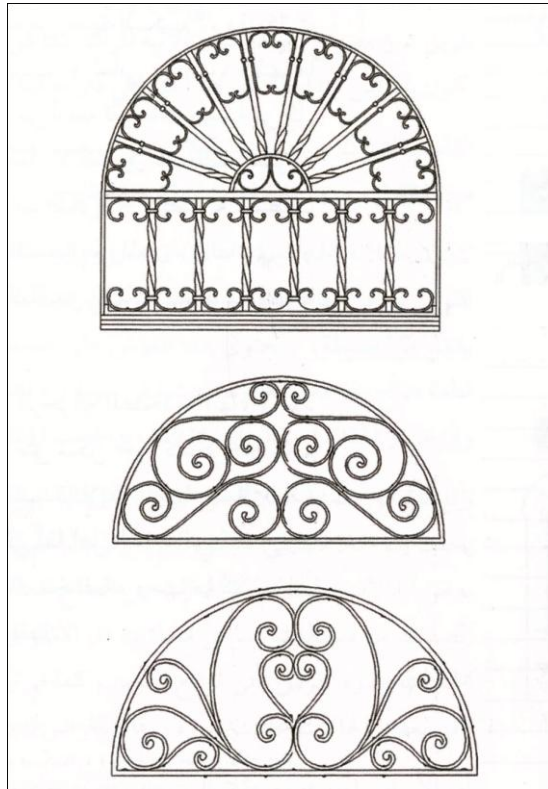


Figure 10. Types of iron protection for windows in Palestine<sup>19</sup>

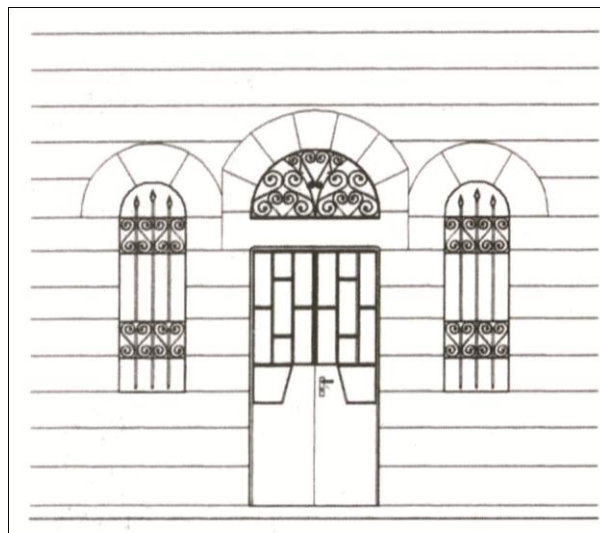


Figure 11. Types of iron protection for door in Palestine<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Al-Jubeih and Bshara, 2002: 264 [Arabic]

<sup>20</sup> Al-Jubeih and Bshara, 2002: 263 [Arabic]

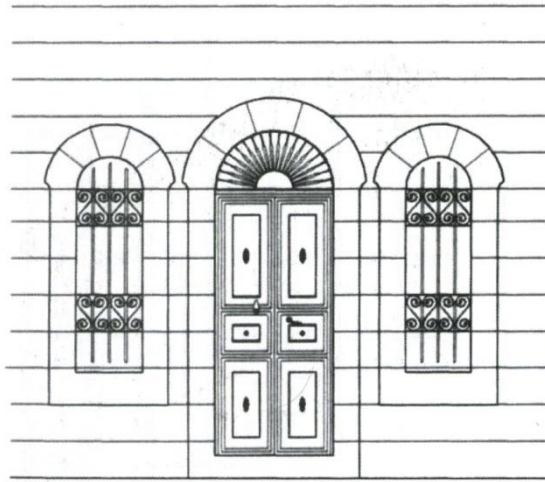


Figure 12. Types of iron protection for door in Palestine<sup>21</sup>

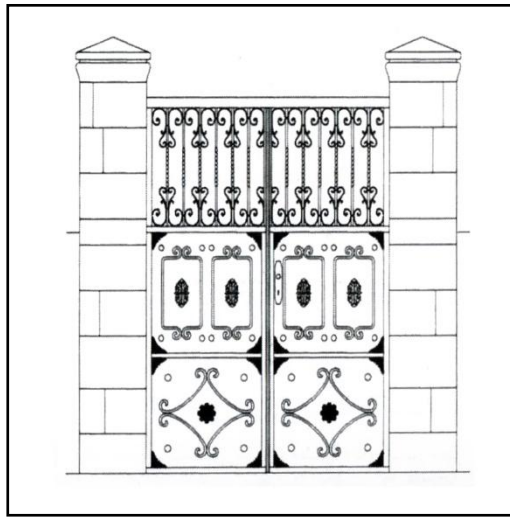


Figure 13. Types of iron protection for door in Palestine<sup>22</sup>

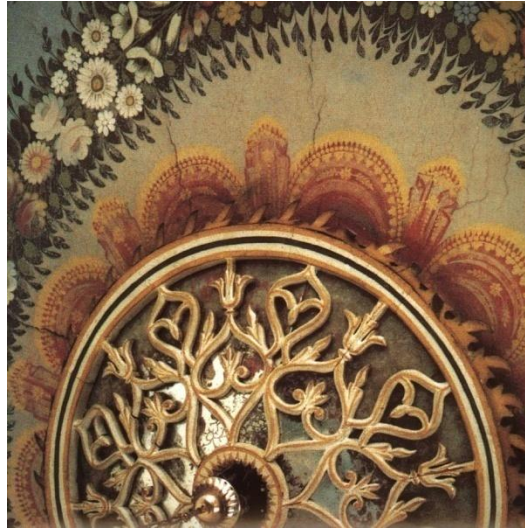
## 5. Woodwork

The Palestinian carpenter was not an inovator like the black smith or the stone carver (*Dkeek Al-Hajar*) because of the scarcity of wood as a building material in Palestine. The use of wood was very limited; the wooden doors were very simple and could not be compared to the Ottoman doors or Mamlouk doors. In the nineteenth century and the first two deçades of the twentieth century, the wooden doors were made of vertical wooden planks in oblique shape. There are two types of wood used in the leafs of the doors: Lebanon cedar and imported wood. It is a hard wood used for the main doors leafs, sometimes covered with iron sheet. For the internal room leafs white wood was used. It is a soft pine tree wood, and in some cases olive and walnut tree wood was used too. The external doors were decorated and carved as well, usually with a simple design or plant decoration. These doors differ from the adorned doors in India

<sup>21</sup> Al-JubeH and Bshara, 2002: 263 [Arabic]

<sup>22</sup> Al-JubeH and Bshara, 2002: 260 [Arabic]

and North Africa: the leaves of the rooms usually have no decorations or carving, but sometimes were carved by making a filling from the same wood. Besides the door leaves, the wood was also used for the leaves of interior arches walls. In most cases white wood was used, carved and painted in green or red.



**Photo 8.** A circular floral wreath surrounds a large wooden flower holding a chandelier in Daher house in Nazareth<sup>23</sup>



**Photo 9.** Some woodwork in the roof Agha Tuqan house in Nablus<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 129, Photographs: Gröndahl

<sup>24</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 112, Photographs: Gröndahl

In the second decade of the twentieth century wooden external doors disappeared and the carpenter's work was limited on the internal doors. These were simply designed without any carving using glass elements. They came in various forms: elliptical, oval and circular using colorful glass: red, blue, yellow and green. The wooden windows were simple with a plain glass, closed with a small metal bird or with a key. In the beginning of the twentieth century iron window frames (*Farza*) replaced the wooden ones. Wood carpentry could still be found in cupboards (*Namleyat*).

The colorful wood ceilings which had distinguished the rich Palestinian families in the cities, especially in Acre and Nazareth, and sometimes in Nablus and Jerusalem, were commonly used during the second half of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century. This beautiful decorative element was influenced by the Ottomans and reflected the civil relationship of Palestinian families with Istanbul. The Ottoman influence was clear in the drawings<sup>25</sup>.



**Photo 10.** Wooden ceiling decorated palace Fares Masoud in Burqa<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Al-Jubeh and Bshara, 2002: 272-273 [Arabic]

<sup>26</sup> Amiry, 2003: 135



**Photo 11.** The main entrance gate with the semi-circular step in front, a clear indicator of a European influence in Khouri house in Jaffa<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Flooring

Palestinians have always decorated the exterior and the interior of their houses. The artist builders have used various decorative elements in the decorations of columns, front doors arches, floors, windows, even the door frames. The floors especially have a complementary effect.

The interior in the Palestinian architecture has a significant value, which is at the same level with the quality of the Middle East architecture. Palestinian builders have paid great attention to the interior as in the floor and ceiling design, as well as the exterior i.e. the façade and have accomplished excellent results. The technical procedure, the choice of motifs, the used materials and their design sense indicate the supreme aesthetic achievements of their creative work.

The floor, as a part of the inner space, has always been a significant component in the interior design. In the history of architecture, the floor has always been a challenge for the builders and craftsmen that concentrated their talent on the design of this interior surface. The flooring in the Palestinian traditional house has a wide range of manufacture and design that vary from the simplest ones to the high quality and complex solutions with a high aesthetic accomplishments, especially found in Palestinian city houses.

<sup>27</sup> Khasawneh, 2001: 79, Photographs: Gröndahl



The quality floor fabrication matches the adequate values of other interior elements as well as the value of the building itself. This value coherence is logical and conditioned by the owner's financial capabilities as well as the builder's and craftsman's creative abilities. It should be emphasized that the skill and the creative abilities can be found in great achievements no matter whether the process was simple or a complex one.

With reference to the interior characteristics of the Palestinian traditional house, the flooring is a primary element in the interior design. Here, the craftsman shows his expertise. He successfully uses the great architectural possibilities of the floor surface and has a serious and inspired approach to this issue. Furthermore, he professionally selects suitable motifs, skillfully combines separate elements into a harmonious unit and stylizes natural forms.

With superb visual harmony friezes have been created of geometric and plant motifs, various stylized plants and flowers that have transformed the floor into a world of nature. The floor content, the decorations and motifs, express the ideas and aspirations of the builder itself as well as the time in which he lived and worked. The range of flooring is wide - from the simplest ones, reduced, but elegant, linear, to extremely rich with a variety of different elements connected in a harmonious artistic unit.



**Photo 12.** Application of the traditional floor tiles in the entrance hall<sup>28</sup>

The master develops and realizes the artistic idea through various procedures, but always skillful and confident. He provides the same consistency in the technical elaboration as well. The simple motifs developed by reduced shapes and materials,

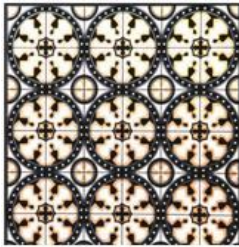
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<sup>28</sup> Amiry, 2000: 17, Photo: Gröndahl and Arafat, Photo 2000

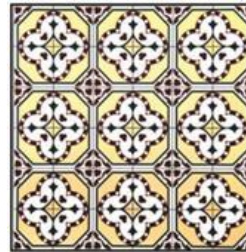
impress as well as the brilliantly elaborated floor sequences. His treatment of form and composition is on the highest professional level.

Regarding the use of motifs and their stylistic treatment, the floor in the traditional Palestinian house was created mainly, in the spirit of the domestic architectural tradition with defining characteristics typical for the Orient. Influences of the Byzantine and Islamic art can sometimes be detected. However, even then, the individual approach to their interpretation and processing can be felt. The master has never accepted dogma and patterns - he created a sincere and inspired art, the most valuable thing in his creative work.

The builder has skillfully used the opportunities that the floor has offered, seeking the unity of artistic expression in all of the interior components. The various motifs used by the master, the sense for the stylized natural forms, the high achievements in the composition of the decorative elements, as well as his logic in procedures contribute to the fact that floors belong to the artistic category of folklore.<sup>29</sup>



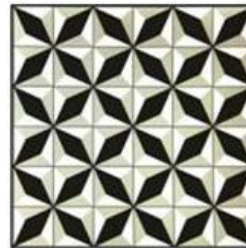
01 Khazendar Residence - Gaza



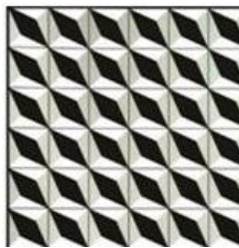
02 Residence - Nablus



03 George Khalaf Residence - Ramallah



04 Abdullah Deeb Residence - Abu Qash



05 Mousa Ramadan Residence - Abu Qash



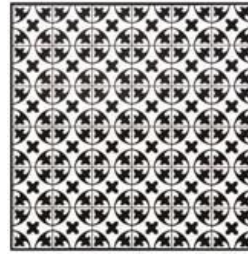
06 Ismaeel Al-Abed Ismaeel Residence - Abu Qash



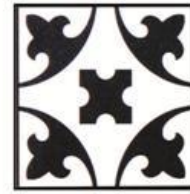
<sup>29</sup> Abuarkub, Izgradnja No: 62, 2008: 40-41



07 Ahmad Jameel Residence – Nablus



08 Saleem Al-Qased Residence – Nablus



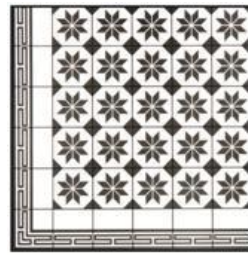
09 Abu Mansour Al-Tamimi Residence-Nablus



10 Ahmad Jameel Residence - Nablus



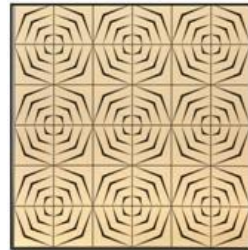
11 Residence - Nablus



12 Ahmad Jameel Residence - Nablus



13 Nabeel Ajlouni Residence – Ramallah



14 Khalil Al-Huseini Residence – Ramallah

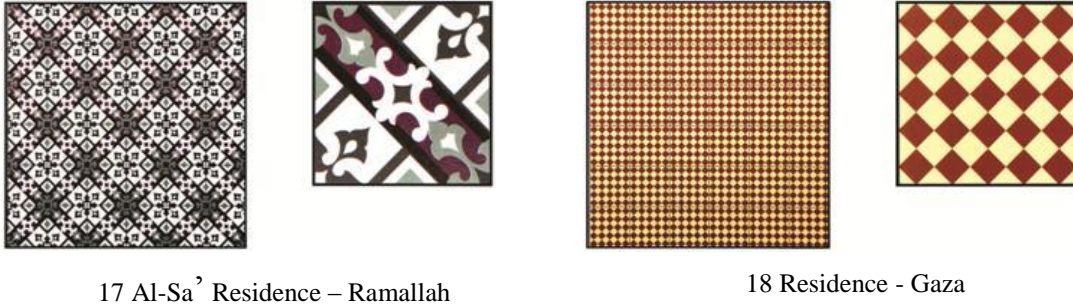


15 Al-Husari Residence – Ramallah



16 Jameel Al-Tamimi Residence - Nablus





17 Al-Sa' Residence – Ramallah

18 Residence - Gaza

**Figure 14.** Patterns of traditional floor tiles in Palestine<sup>30</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The architectural decorative elements represent a significant part of the interior and exterior of the Palestinian traditional houses. With their visual content, technical work and material they have the most important place in the Palestinian house.

The use of such elements in the restoration of traditional houses demands a high quality in the chosen applied materials and tracking the global trends for better quality products.

Traditional arches, porches, blacksmithing, woodwork and floors in Palestine should be produced following the high standards for restoration of Palestinian traditional houses. The use of such decorative elements can be applied to the new buildings today, which will contribute to the preservation of an important historical, architectural element in Palestine.

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<sup>30</sup> Amiry, 2000: 22-66, Drawings: Sobeh

### **Index for originated arabic words**

<i>Dkeek Al-Hajar</i>	Stone carver
<i>Cornishat</i>	Type of geometric decoration
<i>Al-Alali, single Ilye</i>	Guest rooms on the second floor of the house
<i>Sanbaka</i>	In blacksmithing it is a piece of metal used to tie two pieces of metal together
<i>Mbazzar</i>	Decorative non-transparent glass
<i>Farza</i>	Iron window frames
<i>Namleyat</i>	Cupboards