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## **Urban Morphology as a tool for post war reconstruction – the case of Nablus’ Historic Center in Palestine**

**Muath Taher**, University of Minho, Portugal  
Email: [muath\\_tahir@hotmail.com](mailto:muath_tahir@hotmail.com)

Jorge Correia, University of Minho, Portugal  
Email: [jorge.correia@arquitectura.uminho.pt](mailto:jorge.correia@arquitectura.uminho.pt)

### **Abstract**

Nablus is a Palestinian city with a history that extends for over four thousand years. It's known for its rich cultural diversity as a receptacle of different civilisations. Today, its old town shows a typical example of an Arab-Islamic city, having suffered from different natural and/or belligerent catastrophes. The most recent one was a military invasion in 2002. Its historic center and valuable architecture were exposed to different levels of destruction. As a consequence, some reconstruction projects have put in place in the city, with different philosophies, objectives and funding resources, even though many buildings are yet to receive attention and care. Today, there is an urgent need to develop a reconstruction process, avoiding previous errors and insuring cultural continuity and preservation of traditional values.

This research proposes a post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation frame for Nablus old town, inspired by the reading of its urban morphology. It discusses the formation, evolution and constitution of Nablus old town by a retrospective analysis that searches the morphological momentum for each phase in articulation with a reflection around its historical meaning for the city. In order to frame future reconstruction projects, this methodology tries to understand the city internal norms, drawing on the process of interaction between culture and urban environment and their effect on the daily transformation and recovery process. It avoids falling on politically oriented reconstruction approaches, which have not paid enough attention to the place and its structure or not considered the internal formation and transformation message.

The study conducted an urban morphological analysis on both urban and architectural levels in Nablus’ old town, surveying the street hierarchy, plot distribution and residential quarter structure. This understanding contributed to have an accurate perception of the city tissue and the roles behind its metamorphosis. During history Nablus passed through many transformations as a result of historical and cultural changes and/or disasters and present-day Nablus’ physical image echoes a socio-cultural palimpsest. From the Roman grid plan, the city was transformed to suit Muslim culture after the 7th century CE. Since then, socio-cultural criteria lead a profound urban transformation while keeping the trace of the original city. New cultural requirements related to the managing of privacy issues have affected public space hierarchy introducing gradations from public to private, affecting different levels of the urban morphological sphere: from residential quarter to street character, function and levels of accessibility were modified.

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Inside the residential quarter, the spatial configurations changed too, grouping houses around semi-private alleys called “hush”. Privacy and neighbours’ rights have also affected house plans and are reflected in the building composition, orientated to internal spaces while scarcely opening to the outside. Special architectural elements have been used to keep the internal privacy.

Nablus field survey shows that its urban fabric can be understood in the frame of a tight dialogue between social behaviour and the traditional built environment, generating the source of value that legitimizes its physical structure. This frame allows the city to flexibly adapt to peoples cultural and functional requirements and recreate its identity. In this sense, achieving sustainability and ensuring continuity needs to rely much on the wisdom that is embodied in such historic tissues. Cultural urban history can play a paradigmatic data and a fundamental resource for reconstruction processes by reading the city urban morphology in order to advocate for a concerned idea of intervention, especially following urban annihilations, Indeed, from urbicide to recent economic challenges, any reconstruction strategy should embrace a strong cultural vector in its method, the only to guarantee a smooth social continuity. And this couldn’t be more true to Nablus’ old town.

**Keywords:** Nablus, postwar reconstruction, urban morphology.

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### Author’s Biography



Muath Taher is a Palestinian architect, currently he is a PhD student at the School of Architecture in the university of Minho, Portugal, his research theme is postwar reconstruction in the historic cities, Particularly, work on the case of Nablus historic center in Palestine.



Jorge Correia is an Associate Professor at the School of Architecture (EAUM) and a researcher at the Landscape, Heritage and Territory Lab (Lab2PT), both in the University of Minho, Portugal. His main research interests are devoted to the Portuguese early-modern colonial sphere, particularly the Maghreb, the cultural faces/challenges of heritage and traditional Islamic cities, regularly publishing books or book chapters, articles and proceeding papers in these fields. Recently, he was the general chair of the EAHN 2010 conference, a visiting scholar fellow at the CCA (Canada), where he curated the exhibition ‘Photographing the Arab city in the 19th century’, and a guest professor at UFRJ (Brazil) and UJI (Spain).