



**TeMALab**  
Department of Civil, Building and Environmental Engineering  
University of Naples "Federico II"

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**PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE PALESTINIAN VILLAGE DWELLING**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Palestinian villages were one of the arenas severely affected by the British occupation in 1918 and then the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The brutal occupation has been destroying villages and displacing their people to control Palestinian territories. Hundreds of villages were destroyed, and their people were expelled. Consequently, many architectural and urban records of Palestinian history and its of cultural, political, and social aspects were lost. But the worst also occurred with the separation between the Palestinians on both sides of Israel borders since 1948. Generations outside the borders grew up on what remained of the memories of their fathers and grandfathers and the images of the Palestinian villages and their houses. Palestinian students of architecture lost the ability to interact with these spaces and structures necessary for the development clear understanding of Palestinian architecture. This research presents an effort attempted by the author to use the phenomenological approach to connect students of architecture at the Islamic University of Gaza to Palestinian architecture. An important part of the exercise was directed to village dwellings remained in Israel after 1948. The phenomenological approach proved useful in helping the students understand Palestinian architecture from the available digital images and photographs available for the village dwellings. The students used their phenomenological cognition to produce architectural drawings for these dwellings which continue to represent a useful source on Palestinian architecture.*

**Keywords:** Palestine, Village, Architecture, Phenomenology.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Historical architecture is considered one of the most important and authentic records of the history of societies and their cultural, economic, social, and political movements (UK Archive, 2023). This is because it is one of the greatest records of human settlement on earth, the longest in time, and the most surviving evidence throughout the ages. Vernacular architecture is distinguished from the architecture of the elite. It is widespread in place and has the deepest influence on the people because it houses most of them (Arome and Çagnan 2021). It is the most faithful in expressing the conditions of societies because it was built by the people for the people to provide shelter and refuge. In contrast to the architecture of the elite, which is built by distinct members of society to express themselves and their political, economic, social, and cultural powers. It also often expresses luxury, extravagance, and corruption (Hnin, 2022). In many cases, it is unjustly built from people's money, but not for their sake. In other cases, it expresses authoritarian power for the purpose of dominating society and controlling its capabilities.



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In Palestine, the village was and still is one of the important and influential Palestinian spaces in history. It was and still is in modern history a wide arena for the hidden and declared conflict over the Palestinian land since the beginning of the Zionist project and the British Mandate (Al-Ju'beh, 2008).

One of the most prominent features of the Palestinian village is its distinctive urban texture (Carabelli, 2019). The placement of villages in their places depended on the nature around them, as they merged into the geography of the place and its history in a unique organic manner. The elements of the village structure were distributed in harmony with the natural environment and the social and cultural settings. As for its architecture, it represented the truthful and pure expression of Palestinian culture, its artistic formations, its visual compositions, and the skill and creativity in the use of building materials and construction techniques (Al-Ju'beh, N. 2008).

On the other hand, the Palestinian village was one of the arenas severely affected by the British occupation in 1918 and then the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (Ginat, 2018). The villages and their land were the largest area of Palestine, and therefore controlling the villages and their land represented an important goal to control the country. Occupation brutal powers have been destroying villages and displacing their people to achieve this goal. Hundreds of villages were destroyed, and their people were expelled. Consequently, many architectural and urban records of Palestinian history and its cultural, political, and social aspects were erased.

Not only that, but the worst also occurred with the separation between the Palestinians on both sides of Israel's borders in 1948. Generations grew up on what remained of the memories of their fathers and grandfathers. Many efforts were directed to write down these memories in books, stories, anecdotes, and poems. Yet, on the other hand, these generations lost the experience of real living coexistence with urban spaces and the architectural structures of those lost lands. Consequently, Palestinian students of architecture lost the ability to interact with these spaces and structures necessary for the development of urban and architectural creativity and the associated patterns of Palestinian culture and history. Those who grew up in Gaza Strip after 1948 were less fortunate than those of the West Bank. Gaza Strip, since World War I, has been suffering from economic and political problems that affected various cultural and social aspects, including patterns of urban development and architectural formation. This situation worsened after 1948 and continued after 1967. The urban and architectural separation left its traces on the artistic and cultural conscience of those generations over the years without any attention being paid to the need to address this situation, nor to the appropriate methods for such treatment. In 1993, the Department of Architectural Engineering was established at the Islamic University of Gaza, which started to contribute, albeit in a limited way, to building the urban and architectural awareness of the new generations of architecture students. However, the study plan of the department did not include a specialized course in Palestinian architecture to provide an integrated systematic study to build students' self-awareness of Palestinian architecture and its characteristics. This remained the case until 2007, I was the first to suggest to the department that such a course should be offered due to its great importance and because the architecture department in any Palestinian university should seriously be committed to offering this course with this name. The head of the department at the time, Dr. Farid Al-Qeeq welcomed the proposal and insisted that I should teach the course. It was quite a challenge. Not only in determining the study material for the course but also because most of the students did not Gaza Strip and their urban and architectural experience of the Palestinian architecture remained confined to refugee camps and overcrowded cities that lacked the standards of good



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urbanization. They did not have the opportunity to live with any model of historical Palestinian architecture, except the few old houses that still exist in the old city of Gaza and very few remain in other cities. It is true that the study of history, including the history of urbanization and architecture, is usually done theoretically by studying the available written sources, but because human awareness is restricted to the spatiotemporal frameworks drawn by the elements of urbanization and architectural formations, the spatiotemporal coexistence of architecture is considered one of the most important tributaries of its awareness and understanding. This was not available, but there was a unique opportunity to apply a distinguished experience to compensate for this deficiency through the phenomenological approach in architecture, which I also was the first to teach in 2006 in the same department as a separate course. Within this very special context of students of architecture at the Islamic University of Gaza and their study of the Palestinian architecture of the occupied villages, the phenomenological approach provides a unique opportunity to explain Palestinian architecture to the students from one side, and the other side to understand the reactions of the students towards this architecture. Through several years, many dwellings were studied in tens of villages in 1948-occupied Palestine and 1967-occupied Palestine. The concern mainly was directed to the districts of Jerusalem and Al Khalil (Hebron) and Gaza City and its environs. This article studies 11 villages in the Jerusalem district.

#### Phenomenology

Giving a specific definition for phenomenology is a challenge especially if it is to be directed to people outside the circle of philosophy. Phenomenology appeared as an intellectual movement in the early twentieth century by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, and then by his student Martin Heidegger. Then it became one of the important trends in looking at, studying, and analyzing phenomena of the world. Husserl believed that phenomenology is a subjective process that depends on perception. Awareness is the basis of perception and self-realization requires the existence of the phenomenon in front of it. Husserl used the term world of life to refer to the world of self-interdependence that precedes our theoretical experience of natural phenomena. At the same time, Husserl believes that objective, empirical, natural experience is nothing but the product of human factors and their related aspects of culture and society. Accordingly, the phenomenological approach moves away from the rigid rules of the experimental approach. It relies on the researcher himself who records his impressions of the phenomenon and how he experiences it in the reality of the life world without any hypotheses about the phenomenon. This highlights the importance of the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon. Thus, the outcome of the phenomenological approach will be narrative analytical studies and not the conclusions of objective tests. (Teodosio, 2005).

The phenomenological approach uses sensational perception to explore the phenomena and their relationships with the people and then tries to understand the sensational reactions of these people (Maveety, 2008).

On the contrary, Heidegger looked at phenomenology as a method of perception that does not require the presence of the self in front of the phenomenon. He describes phenomenology as the way to allow what shows itself to be seen through itself. For him, phenomenology is not primarily about the phenomena that we want to study, but rather about the way in which we study these phenomena. Phenomenology is a method for exploring the hidden sides of these phenomena and making them manifest themselves. In this regard, Heidegger believed that man



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is distinguished from other species because of his spatial relationships with his world. This world, according to Heidegger, is divided into material phenomena and non-material phenomena. Material phenomena include original natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, earth, and sky in addition to man-made phenomena, such as buildings, roads, and squares. Non-material phenomena also include feelings, sensations, habits, traditions, ideals, and principles. Heidegger considered that this world existed before man. Then his struggle started for the making of place and the creation of space and integrating them with the physical and human environments. These places and spaces represented the world of daily life in which he grew and developed. (Gonabadi et al, 2020).

The philosophy of Modernism did not prove viable for explaining the phenomena of life, especially those that are connected to people and are related to their social and cultural aspects. As such, architecture cannot be understood only through the material components. Because there is always more than that, people who make this architecture and those who use it, all have their personal, communal, social, cultural, and psychological characteristics. For such kind of complex relationships, phenomenology provides a suitable approach for its study, analysis and understanding. This approach rejects the adoption of natural sciences as the sole means for the development of human knowledge. It relies on reflective and intuitive thinking that does not depend on any prior assumptions to develop knowledge. The phenomenological approach is not empirical. Phenomenological knowledge cannot be obtained through experimentation and objective analysis, as there are always subjective human aspects that have an impact on guiding knowledge development. Phenomenology is a descriptive cognitive approach that deals with the phenomena of existence through study and analysis to reach the hidden secrets and meanings that surround them. The phenomenological approach is one of the descriptive analytical research methods that aims to explore the secrets of the hidden phenomenon and its hidden meanings and implications.

#### **Phenomenology and architecture**

The history of architecture cannot be confined only to the history of building materials and methods of construction, but it is the history of ideas produced by society and culture. Every society has its own culture that distinguishes it from others. (Ehrett, 2023). The post-modern and post-positive period usually looks at the products of architecture and the built environment in general with its functional components and structural calculations. While the phenomenological approach searches in these products for the meanings and ideas that guided man during their production. This is evident in Husserl's saying that awareness of the world is not merely passive acceptance of what is in it but is active and intentional participation in the formation of what is in it. This is exactly what applies to studies of architecture, which should not limit architectural creativity to the means and materials of producing the built form but must include the human interactions that contributed to its production (Teodosio, 2005).

The Phenomenological approach reveals the spirit of the phenomena. Through this approach, we better understand the sensory perception of architecture and the built environment, or in other words, the sense of architectural space and the sense of architectural place. Both space and place have expressions, symbols, meanings, and secrets formulated by the culture and social structures of their makers. (Maveety, 2008).

The spirit of architectural space and the spirit of the urban place express themselves in the world of existence through their spatial components of floors, walls, roofs, and materials with their



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colors and textures. They also have the natural aspects that interact with them such as shadow, light, darkness, heat, cold, humidity and air. (Maveety, 2008).. All these elements and aspects refer precisely and specifically to the content, concept, and rhythm of the world of daily life, which people usually do not pay attention to, nor to its details. This world cannot be imagined without the human being in it. (Simon, 2000).

#### **Phenomenology of the dwelling and sense of place**

The dwelling represents an objective existential phenomenon of our life world. Heidegger was the first to introduce the philosophy of dwelling into phenomenology. He linked the existential nature of the dwelling to the life world or the world of daily life. The phenomenon of the dwelling has existential reality which all people perceive in the same way. It has architectural realities that people differ in their perception because of the differences in their emotional and sensational contents. And because of the many meanings and ideas that are reflected by them. This is in addition to the specialties of human subjective frameworks such as culture, society, and politics.

Man has been associated with the dwelling since the dawn of history, from the day he came out of the cave and looked for a place in the space that extended before him. He began making the place of the dwelling by choosing a specific location of land to be suitable for establishing the new shelter. This choice and preparation were not merely mechanical or environmental though it had these characteristics. It was the sense of place that led to the decisions of where and how to delineate this place. The search for meanings responded to what he wanted to see and learn and what he wanted to know and explore. There also were the feelings and emotions for making the place to be loved, looking good, and seemed viable. This initial stage was then followed by the creation of the architectural space of the dwelling. He built his first primitive structure not only as a shelter. He didn't just come out of the cave to make a shelter. Shelter, refuge, and protection were probably more fulfilled in the cave than in the hut. But he wanted to express his being in this world. He wanted to go out into the vast emptiness of space and interact with it responding to the interactions of feelings and emotions in his heart, and thoughts and visions in his mind. From here, the dwelling and its organic connection to man was created. It is not possible to look at the emergence of architecture without a careful understanding of this relationship before looking at its material components (Maveety, 2008).

As an example, the round houses of Britain which are dated from the Bronze Age throughout the Iron Age illustrate this reflection of dwelling. This dwelling reflected the very primitive existential perception of the round horizon around the sight of the human.

The dwelling represents the most important type of human interaction with the environment and the life world. It is the basic form of being in the world as invented by Heidegger. Despite the many studies that dealt with the dwelling from its cultural, social, psychological, and engineering aspects, few dealt with the basic philosophy of the establishment of the dwelling and the symbols and meanings associated with each dwelling that distinguish it from the other. Among the many approaches that dealt with this subject, the phenomenological approach stands out in its ability to explore what is behind the physical structure of the dwelling in terms of these meanings and indications.

According to Heidegger, the dwelling establishes the relationship between the cosmological world, the anthropological man, and the structure of the dwelling. This relationship includes



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various transformations in man's relationship with the world of the dwelling: from existence to presence, from presence to settlement, from settlement to place, from place to dwelling, and from dwelling to place. Christian Norberg-Schulze is considered one of the best in the study of analgesic phenomenology.

In his book: *The Present - Language - Place* (2009), he showed that limiting the dwelling to the quantities of materials used in its construction is limiting its value to the mere walls, ceilings, and floors that make it up, emptying it of the spirit of place, and the absence of the meaning of being. (Gonabadi et al, 2020).

Edward Ralph believes in his book *Place and Nowhere* (1976) that a dwelling loses its meaning if it cannot have a sense of place in the location in which it originates. (Gonabadi et al, 2020)

Regarding the Palestinian village dwelling, it is a special representation of the phenomenological meaning of dwelling. It shows how the architecture of the dwelling evolved from the human consciousness of architecture in a compatible way with his existential meaning he found himself adopting it by nature. The Palestinian villager built his dwelling from his perception of his relation to his land. He wanted to feel a deep sense of place by taking care of his land in a meditative way to make himself an existential part of the safety and belonging found in the basic relation of humans and land.

#### **Key approaches in phenomenological research**

Phenomenological research has special concerns on the suitable ways for dealing with the phenomena of the lived world and the world of everyday life. The special connections between the phenomena, people, and the researcher require suitable frameworks of inquiry that are sensitive to issues like subjectivity and prejudice. Yüksel and Soner (2015) introduced 6 approaches to phenomenological inquiry. They include Lived Experience, Intentionality, Epoché, Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Co-researchers (Yüksel, 2015).

This research used 2 approaches. The first was the lived experience approach. The students were for the first time subjected to the Palestinian traditional village dwellings and their distinguished architecture. This approach investigates the lived experience of students with the phenomenon of the Palestinian village dwelling. It is their first time and first-hand experience of the phenomenon and their actions and reactions, activities, and behaviors were observed. The second approach was Imaginative Variation.

The students were trained to use their imagination to produce their pure original designs for the dwellings concentrating on the relationship between it and the surroundings to express the sense of space of the dwelling. At the same time, we examined the 3Ds of the dwellings produced by the students and used our imagination to assess their perception of the sense of place of the dwellings.

## **2. MATERIALS and METHODS**

The course Palestinian Architecture was given to 2 separate groups of male and female students according to the education system at the Islamic University of Gaza. 18 female students worked in the villages of Jerusalem district. The villages were chosen randomly from the list of the district villages. None of the students has ever visited any of the villages or any other similar villages in Palestine. The main source for photos of villages in 1948-occupied Palestine was the



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website [Palestineremembered.com](https://palestineremembered.com/)- <https://palestineremembered.com/> . The main source for photos of villages in 1967-occupied Jerusalem was the website of Riwaq - Centre for architectural conservation- <https://www.riwaq.org/home> , and its registry of historic buildings, <https://www.riwaq.org/riwaq-register/registry-historic-buildings> . Students also were free to search for information on these villages and their dwelling architecture from any other resources. Their task was to experience the architecture of the village and to prepare plans, sections, and elevations of at least 2 examples of dwellings based on the photos of the village. Special attention was paid to the production of 3D images of the dwellings. They were free to choose any available means of visual presentation. Discussion, presentations, and narratives continued for the whole semester.

### 3. FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

The exercise was very exciting. When Palestinians talk about their history, country, land, and architecture they feel great stimulation. The students were raised under occupation and their lived experiences were occupied with brutal aggression. Their life world did not exceed the tiny area of Gaza region of 360 km<sup>2</sup> sieged from two sides by Israel, from the south by Egypt, and from the west by sea. The exercise gave them a chance to have a new lived experience in the classroom with the virtual architecture of the Palestinian village. It was a tough struggle for me and them. I studied, worked, and lived in the West Bank and visited Jerusalem and its environs several times. I also visited several Palestinian cities and villages in Israel. Yet these young students never did. They struggled very hard to be immersed in the life world of the Palestinian village to understand the atmosphere of its urban structure and architectural detail. How could they have a lived experience in an imagined built environment? How could they feel the sense of place of imagined places? How could they feel the sense of architecture without being immersed in its space?

The following discussion of the students' work sheds more light on these questions.

The images of Sataf village (table 1) used by the student clearly show a strong relationship between the dwellings and the village atmosphere. They show the organic relationship between the dwelling and the context. Students were free to use any means of visual presentation for their dwellings. This one (and all the others as will be shown later) used SketchUP software. The 3Ds were bare and bold volumes of the dwelling without any sense of life or significance or relationship with context. The type of figures, trees and grass are not Palestinian. They even lack the sense of nostalgia, the sense of pride, or the storytelling of any life feature of the village dwelling.



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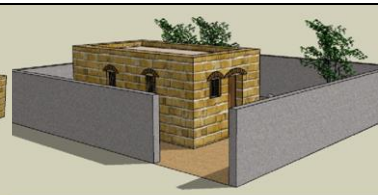
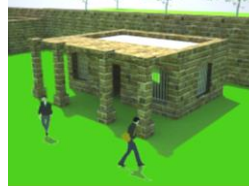
**Table 1.** Reconstruction of Palestinian Dwelling in Sataf Village

Sataf village (1948-occupied Jerusalem)- General images of the village



Images of inspiring houses and remains

3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses



Although the Deir Yasin village photos (Table 2) show several elements that represent the richness of lived experience in the spaces of the dwellings and between them in this village, students represent the dwellings as separated units without the richness of the original photos. The plants used in the context are not the same in the images of the village.

It is worth mentioning that this village specifically is linked to a massacre in 1948 that lived with despair and grief in the memory of every Palestinian.



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**Table 2.** Reconstruction of Palestinian Dwelling in Deir Yasin Village

Deir Yasin village (1948-occupied Jerusalem)- General images of the village



3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses



It is noticed that Lifta village (Table 3) has a unique sense of place which put it on the list of UNESCO's tentative World Heritage Sites. It has many inspiring house compositions. On the other hand, when students re-imagine the sense of place here, they cannot reflect the sense of natural landscape that surrounds the dwellings. However, this result emphasizes the effect of the forced displacement of the ancestors of the students from their original land.

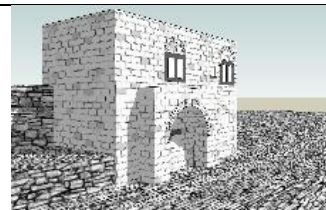
**Table 3.** Reconstruction of Palestinian Dwelling in Lifta Village

Lifta village (1948-occupied Jerusalem)- General images of the village



Images of inspiring houses and remains

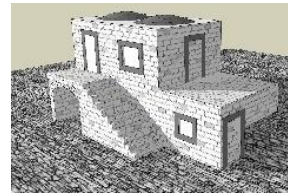
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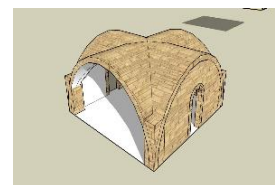
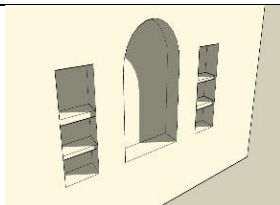
Nataf village images (Table 4) raise the notion of internal space cognition and its relation to the outer original space in the Palestinian village. The construction system used, the raw building materials, and the other elements distinguished the Palestinian dwelling was remodeled by the students in their try to experience the sense of living inside the village dwelling. It is noticed that they reflect the elements they noticed in the images, but they still cannot connect it to the overall sense of place that represents the unique duality of indoor-outdoor spaces in the Palestinian village.

**Table 4.** Reconstruction of Palestinian Dwelling in Nataf Village.

Nataf village (1948-occupied Jerusalem)- General images of the village



3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses



The general photos of Ain Karem (Table 5) village show that the village's full perception is inherited in its natural intricate components of hills, trees, rocks, and dwellings.

The students who work here show their perception of the dwelling as perceived from the monochrome image. The student did not reflect his sense of the material of this dwelling.



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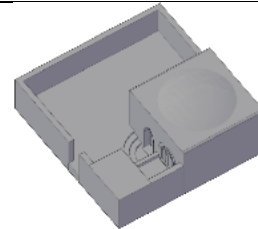
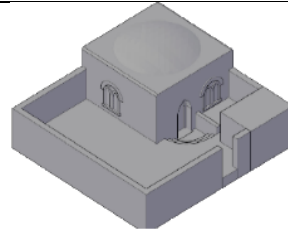
**Table 5.** Reconstruction of Palestinian dwelling in Ain Karem village.

Ain Karem village (1948-occupied Jerusalem)- **General images of the village**



Images of inspiring houses  
and remains

3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses

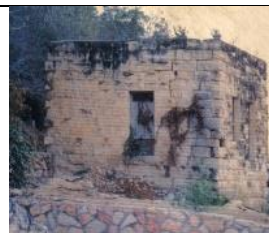


The images of Beit Mahsir (Table 6) inspiring houses show how these two houses are rich with Palestinian dwelling elements. Here, the student reflected on the details in his imagination of the house. However, it is noticed that they could not catch the full perception of the context of the Palestinian dwelling in the village. This is due to the altered sense of place that is caused by the occupation and the dramatic disconnection it made in the whole Palestinian life-world experience from that time till now.

**Table 6.** Reconstruction of Palestinian dwelling in Beit Mahsir village.

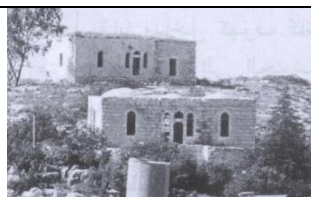
Beit Mahsir village (1948-occupied Jerusalem)-

General images of the village



Images of inspiring  
houses and remains

3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses





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The cubic form of the inspiring remaining house of Deir Aban (Table 7) village was illustrated by the student via a 3D program with different proportions for the door and window. It was represented as an isolated structure away from its context.

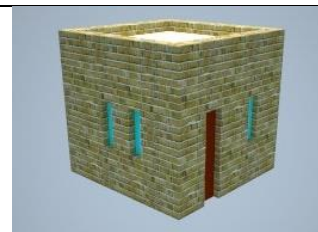
**Table 7.** Reconstruction of Palestinian dwelling in Deir Aban Village.

Deir Aban village (1948-occupied Jerusalem)- General images of the Village



Images of inspiring houses and remains

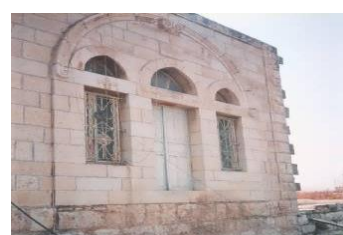
3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses



Al-Qubeiba village (Table 8) inspiring houses seem to be more detailed and spacious than the previous villages. It is noticed that the student added a perception of the contemporary materials to feel time continuity for this house as it is still inhabited by its owners.

**Table 8.** Reconstruction of Palestinian Dwelling in Al-Qubeiba Village.

Al-Qubeiba village (1967--occupied Jerusalem)- General images of the village



Images of inspiring houses and remains

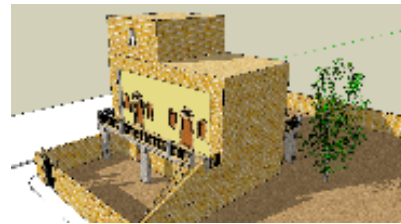
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The images of Abu Dis village (Table 9) show clearly that the built environment of this village tends to be more transitioning towards civilization in that period (1967). The student perceived the sense of place of the inspiring house of this village in a similar way he perceived her contemporary built environment, so it is noticed that she added a wall in front of the doors of the house as a representation of property boundaries that used to be in civilian spaces.

**Table 9.** Reconstruction of Palestinian dwelling in Abu Dis Village.

Abu Dis village (1967--occupied Jerusalem)- **General images of the village**

3



Images of inspiring houses and remains

3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses



Nabi Samwil village (Table 10) shows the raised natural landscape of the village's terrains. The inspiring house shows a palace with several spaces and two stories. The student illustrated this unique architectural composition with its natural material and completed the living experience in this house by adding developed elements such as stairs and ironworks. However, the student also could not catch the full sense of place with its natural context.



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**Table 10.** Reconstruction of Palestinian dwelling in Nabi Samwil Village.

Nabi Samwil village (1967--occupied Jerusalem)- General images of the village



Images of inspiring houses and remains

3Ds of students' imaginations of the houses



**4. CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is concluded that even if the Palestinian students lost the ability to interact with their existential context where their real architecture emerged and developed, the phenomenological approach and cognition helped students catch some aspects of the villages and their dwellings.

Although it is noticed that the students could not represent the organic sense of place of natural landscape fully, it is considered very valuable to expose the students to such experience to build the conception of their architecture gradually.

In addition, The Palestinian sense of place and belonging is harmfully affected by the occupation. The ancestors belonging to the land feeling was altered in a dramatic way which affected the sense of being and the everyday lifeworld.

Furthermore, although the largest number of Palestinians are descendants of villagers, it is noticed that the new generation, including architecture students, have difficulties in simulation and living the lifeworld and experience of village life which is, in essence, the very original existential connection of the human to the earth.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Note on Authors' Contribution**

Dr. Abdurrahman Mohamed contributed 70% of the work and Architect Nesma El Saqqa contributed 30% of the work.

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