

The Golden Era of as-Salt (1870-1950): Urban and Architectural Development

Introduction

This paper is based on extensive work and research carried out by a team of architects from the Building Research Centre at the Royal Scientific Society (RSS). The research started in 1987 when the RSS embarked on a pioneer project to document the architectural heritage of Jordan. As-Salt was taken as a pilot study and the first volume of the *Handbook of Architectural Heritage in Jordan* was published in 1990. During this period, RSS was commissioned by the as-Salt Development Corporation to conduct a study to define the extent of the old city that should be preserved and redeveloped in order to stimulate economic activity in the area and maintain the historic character of the city. This involved preparing an Implementation Plan for the city centre. The study was produced in three volumes covering the general strategy of preservation for as-Salt, the Implementation Plan, the supporting actions, and full background material on survey and research data.

The authors acknowledge the efforts made by colleagues who took part in these two important projects.

Background

Since time immemorial, as-Salt was endowed with all constants necessary to support a human settlement and form an urban gathering; geography, topography, climate and water supply. In addition, prosperity of inhabitants, regional historic events, the city's cultural ambience and the introduction of new building materials have all gradually formulated the present as-Salt.

As-Salt lies 30 km north-west of 'Ammān at an altitude of 800 m. Its fertile land and mild climate have attracted settlers from the Stone Age onwards. It has traditionally been a trading and market centre serving Gilead on the East Bank, with links to Nāblus, Jerusalem and the Mediterranean to the west and Damascus to the north.

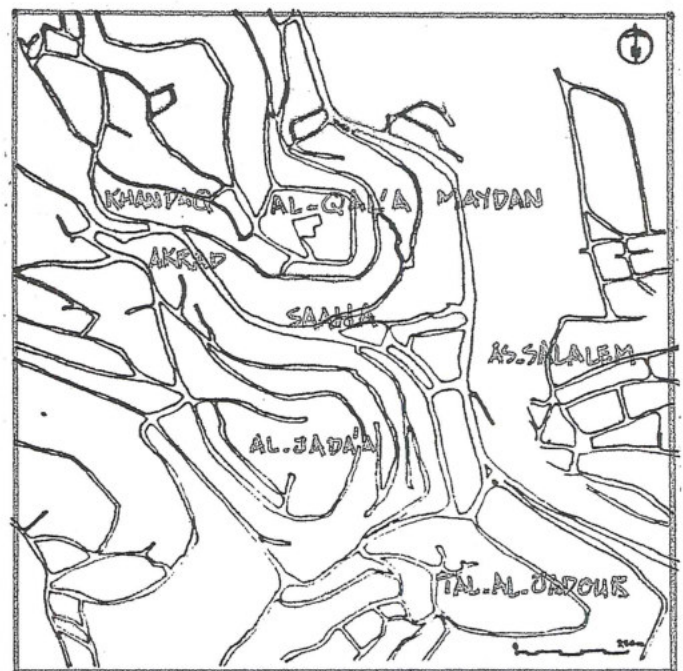
Under the Ottoman rule (starting in the 16th century), the area went into a state of instability and depopulation. This continued until the later part of the 19th century

when the Ottomans attempted reforms in their ruling systems, hence improving the living conditions for the people.

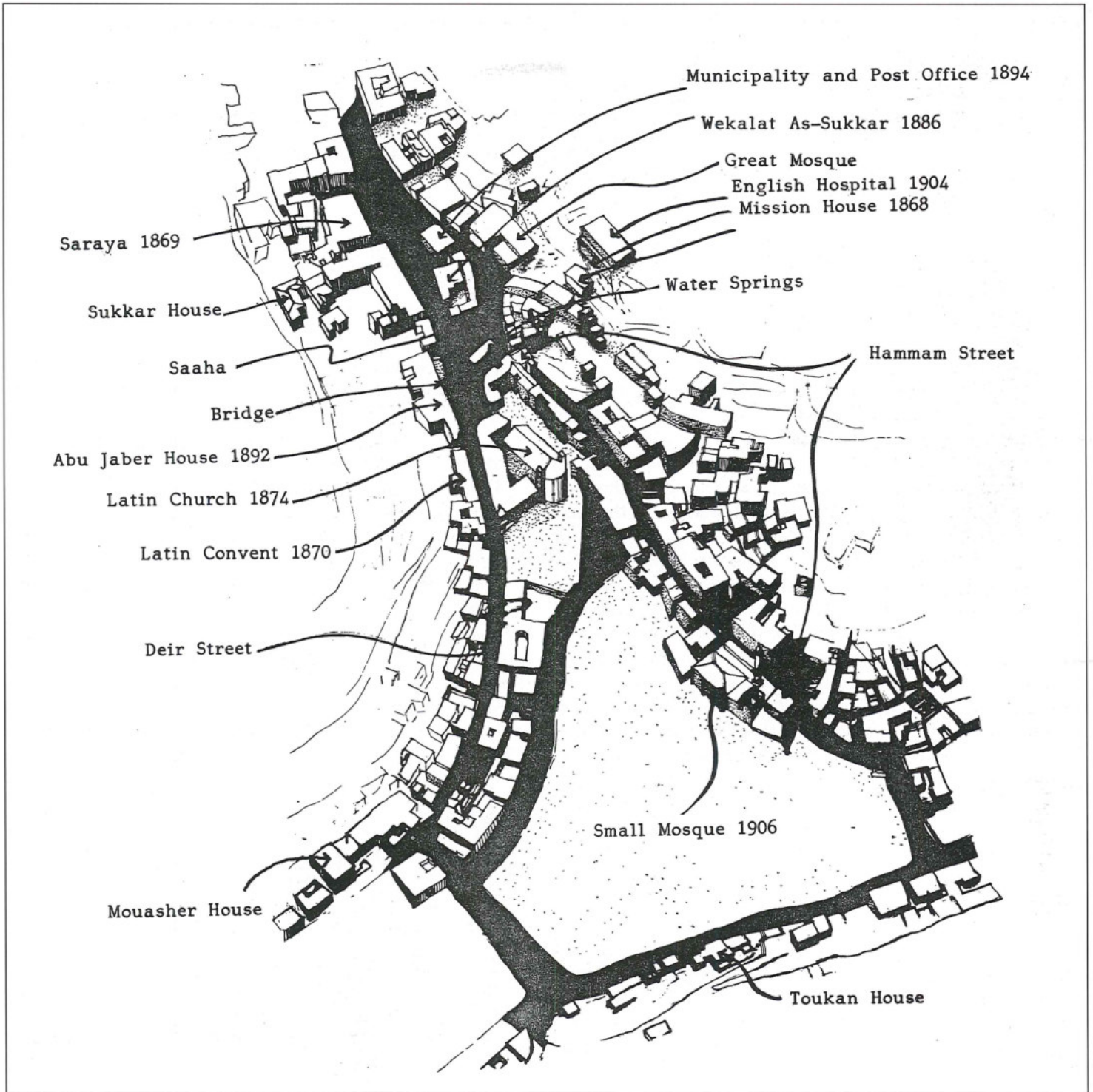
The revival of as-Salt started in 1866 when the Governor of Damascus re-established order and moved the *Kaimakam* to it. Shortly afterwards, the Governorate's building (*Sarāya*) was built. New people moved in, in particular the merchants from Nāblus, to extend their commercial base across Jordan. Various Christian missions were also established. The city expanded and the architecture changed from rural to urban.

Expansion and Growth (FIGS. 1-3)

By the end of the 16th century, as-Salt was composed of two major *Mahallāt* (settlements); namely, Akrād (the lower slopes of al-Qal'a and al-Jada'a and the valley between them) and 'Awāmla (the eastern slopes of al-



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Qal'a) as well as the castle (al-Qal'a). In the early 19th century, a third Maḥalla (Qṭayshāt) appeared on the slopes of al-Qal'a between 'Awāmla and Akrād.

With the establishment of the Governorate, and the construction of its building, as-Sarāya, in 1869 in as-Sāḥa (in the valley between the hills of al-Qal'a and al-Jada'a), the city as a whole grew around it and the

Maḥallāt were interlocked. This attracted various important activities; amongst them was "Wikalat as-Sukkar" which was built in the centre and accommodated a specialized *sūq* for expensive goods at its eastern part as well as various public facilities at its western part (i.e., the Post Office, the Tax Department and the Health Directorate).



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An important feature of as-Sāḥa was the three water fountains serving people and animals. In the 1920s, yellow “Salt stone” pavement was added to as-Sāḥa and the nearby areas such as al-Ḥammām, al-Khaḍīr and ad-Dayr streets. Various religious buildings surrounded the area; mainly, the Great Mosque (which existed before the 1860s although the exact date of its construction is not

known), the Latin Convent (built in 1871), and the Anglican Church and Hospital. Rich merchants and influential people had their houses built close by as well.

The people who moved to as-Salt as a result of the prosperity and order of the late 1860s — mainly traders from Nāblus — then settled east of as-Sāḥa, at al-Ḥammām Street and its surroundings. This area was later

called Maḥallat an-Nawābulṣa (referring to the origin of the settlers) or Maḥallat al-Aghrāb. As the majority were traders, the street became a commercial one with shops on the lower level and houses on the upper. Cattle were sold at its lower or eastern end while vegetables were sold at its upper or western end on Fridays and Mondays. The street was named after the public baths that existed half way through the street but were demolished in the 1940s when as-Salt had its water network. Other commercial areas appeared such as ad-Dayr Street and Iskāfiyya Stairway.

By the end of the 19th century, the city covered the slopes of al-Qal'a and al-Jada'a as well as as-Sāḥa and al-Ḥammām Street. Expansion continued into the 20th century, so that by 1918, it covered al-Maydān Street (the valley between al-Qal'a and as-Salālim), further parts of al-Jada'a, as well as al-Khandaq (west of Akrād). Afterwards, the rate of growth slowed down. This was due to various political events (mainly, the First World War and the establishment of the Emirate's capital at 'Ammān) so that by 1940, the major expansion in the city was in as-Salālim area with minor expansions in Tall al-Jadūr and al-Khandaq.

The Townscape of Old as-Salt

During this rapid growth of the city, various townscape features evolved. The city grew on the steep slopes of the three hills (al-Qal'a, al-Jada'a and as-Salālim) and the valley between them. The architecture went in harmony with the landscape and topography, and together, they formed an architectural amphitheatre with the green fields of the valley as its base (FIG. 4).



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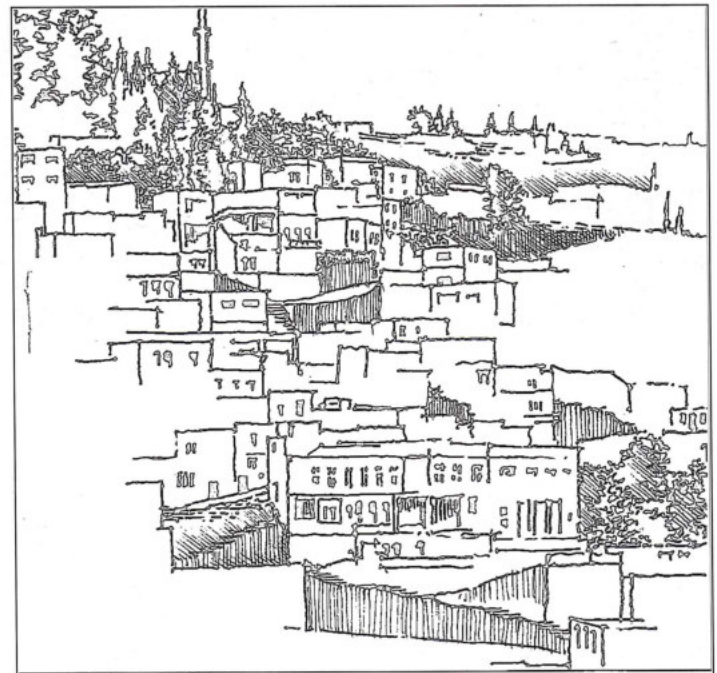
The buildings of as-Salt were usually subdivided into cellular units, thus giving the impression of fragmented architecture rather than big solid masses. As they go up the hills, these units follow the contours, and recess to allow the neighbours to overlook rather than block the view (FIG. 5).

Walls were usually built of courses of yellow "Salt stone" with a smooth texture and no pointing. Adjacent buildings had their exterior walls aligned, thus resembling the walls of citadels or otherwise the traditional terraces of the area's countryside. These walls emphasized the containment of the valley in the middle, and stressed verticality and the importance of the skyline. This is especially felt when one enters the city from 'Ammān and faces the clusters of buildings on the slopes which dominate the view.

Due to the steepness of the slopes, stairways were used as the major circulation pattern (FIG. 6). A web of footpaths and stairways running across the slopes was formed which gave a close-knit pedestrian scale to the city. Where the contours allowed, narrow streets went along them with buildings built right to the edge.

In the 1920s, streets and stairways were paved with yellow "Salt stone" in courses of 25-30 cm laid across. They sloped to the middle to allow the water to drain.

As for the commercial areas, shops usually had wide arched doors with wooden shutters of 2-3 panels (FIG. 7). No shop fronts existed and goods were stacked in piles and bundles and hung on walls inside and outside the shop. Corrugated sheets fixed to metal frames were used as awnings. The metal frames were also used for hanging goods.



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The city has a dense urban form with minor patches of greenery spread around. Amongst them are the tree-covered summit of al-Jada'a and the adjacent cemetery, and the small hill of Tall al-Jadūr around the old secondary school. As-Salālīm, however, has a different character with very steep slopes of barren rock and a few sparsely vegetated terraces.

Style and Character: Characteristics by Period

As-Salt is unique, not only in its townscape quality, but

also in the merit of its individual buildings, which possess a distinguished architectural value and special characteristics that have been gradually outlined throughout the course of history (FIG. 8).

Developments of building techniques, architectural characteristics, building materials and construction methods have been traced back in history in order to identify and explicate the successive periods of development.

In the last 100 years or so, as-Salt merged into an important phase of its evolution, during which the architectural style changed from traditional "peasant" houses built of local materials (e.g. rubble stone, tree trunks, mud and hay) to one influenced by the International Modern style using new materials (e.g. concrete and I-beams). The transition was generally gradual and naturally overlapped. But, nevertheless, five general periods can be identified starting prior to 1866. These are:

The Pre-1866 "Village" Type

The influence of the Ottoman rule over as-Salt in this period was weak. As-Salt was composed of three large Maḥallāt (Akrād, 'Awāmla and Qṭayshāt) characterised by simple single-storey "peasant" houses scattered about the hillslopes, totally integrated with nature in form, material and setting.

The single-storey "peasant" house, typical of the Jordanian village houses of that period, was built in local style using local materials. It was composed of one cubical unit on a hillslope. Walls were one metre thick with rough untreated stone on both sides. Roofs were supported on stone arches (*qaṇṭara*), usually three, spaced at 1.5 m. Tree trunks covered with mud and hay spanned



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over them (FIG. 9). This allowed for a longitudinal space expandable through the addition of more arches. Each arch spanned four to six metres across. Thus, an uninterrupted space reaching about 50 m² was provided in a three-arch construction.

Back facades were usually buried in the hillslope, the roof being at the same level of the backgrounds (FIG. 10). Openings were confined to the front facade where structural arches formed the door lintels. Windows were generally two small arched ones as well as a few tiny squared ones (*tāqāt*) which were used for ventilation purposes. Cut stone outlined both doors and windows.

The single space interior formed from such construction was divided through change of level into three sub-spaces (FIGS. 11, 12); the first, closer to the door and lower in level, was used for animals (*qā' al-bayt*). This led through a number of steps to a higher living area (*al-mastaba*), and the third and highest was used mostly for storage and sometimes for sleeping (*as-Sidda*).

Storage bins built from wooden frames covered with mud were fitted between the arches (*rawāyā*). Crops were dried on the roofs, then filled in the storage bins through small openings penetrating the roof. Smaller bins (*kawāyir*) were built from mud and hay in the living area adjacent to the walls; these were used for storing

food supplies for daily use.

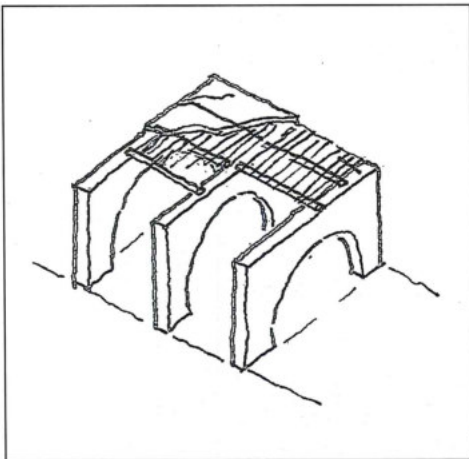
In this period, people, mostly farmers, lived outdoors while using their houses for sleeping, protection and storage.

The Regional Era (1866-1890)

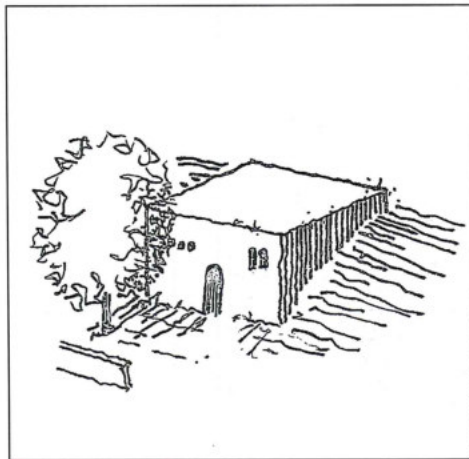
In 1866, the Ottomans attempted to re-assert their authority over as-Salt by moving the Kaimakam to it; this ensured political stability and resulted in immigration, prosperity and urban/commercial growth. Development in this period was completely different from the traditional pre-1866 "peasant" houses.

New buildings were urban in character — although, no doubt, "peasant" houses continued to be built into the 20th century — presumably constructed by skilled Nābulṣī craftsmen. Constructions were more sophisticated, built using squared masonry (FIG. 13). The inner side of the wall was built of rough untreated stone, while the outer side was built from coursed "Salt stone" brought from the as-Salālim quarries.

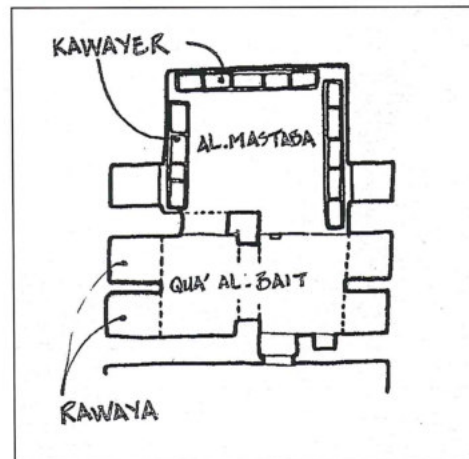
A building was composed of a number of cells adjacent to each other, where each cell was around 4 x 4 m, two storeys high. The ground floor roof was a crossvault while the upper floor roof was a shallow dome, both constructed from rubble stone.



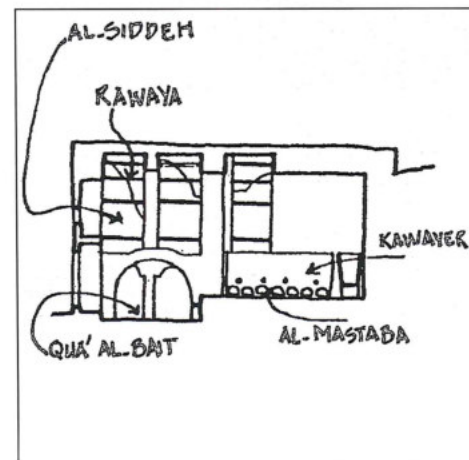
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Openings were distributed on all facades, with a higher proportion to the solid wall than before. Gateways were emphasised through recessed planes. Windows, usually paired with pointed or semi-circular arches, were treated in a flush manner. Some corbels were also used in this period.

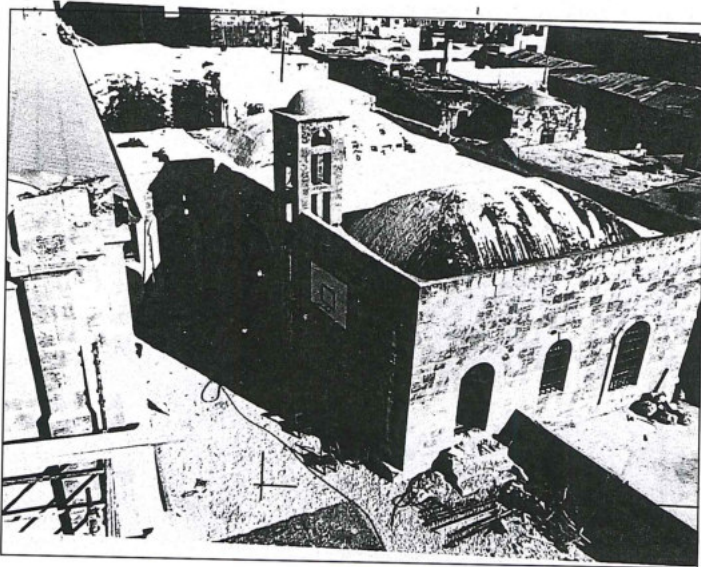
Unlike the previous period, a building's interior was divided into a number of rooms, each with a defined function; kitchen, bedroom, sitting room. The number of hours spent indoors by the inhabitants increased. Farming was no longer the major occupation; some worked as traders, others as public employees.

The Boom Years (1890-1918)

In the 1890s, commercial activities with Palestine, especially Nāblus, along with contacts from the West, brought additional prosperity, culture and craftsmanship within a very short period of time. This enhanced the uniqueness and importance of the city, and created a distinguished style originating from regional heritage and influenced by European and Near Eastern styles and techniques.

Growth was very rapid, and the development became more complex in character. Imported materials such as roof tiles, timber, I-beams and marble were introduced. Buildings, still compact and urban, rose up to three and four-storeys high. Each was subdivided into several cubical units terraced one over the other (FIG. 14).

More elaborate urban houses and public buildings (institutional, commercial and religious) started to be built; these formed prominent landmarks.



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Walls continued to be built from coursed "Salt stone". Although pitched roofs were introduced using timber trusses, the majority of buildings still used crossvaults and shallow domed roofs.

Highly decorative gateways, window surrounds and carved details were common. Steel I-beams started to be used for projecting balconies. Some prosperous families and establishments could afford more flamboyant buildings using imported roof tiles, colourfully designed ceilings, interlacing glass formations and ingrained marble.

Post War Era (1918-1935)

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, as-Salt was temporary capital for the young newly established Emirate of Transjordan for a few months, after which, the capital was moved to 'Ammān. Expansion began to slow down. Influence became more European but still reflected regional style.

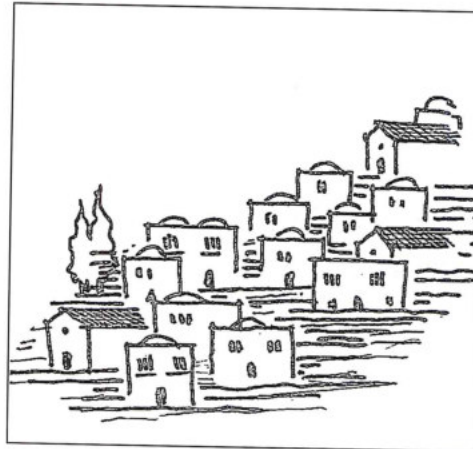
In 1923, the Municipality paved some streets, planted trees and introduced street lights. In addition, all houses were given 15 days notice to install latrines.

The major change which affected the architectural style was the introduction of I-beams and concrete slabs for floors and flat roofs; I-beams were spaced every 60 cm with a 12 cm concrete slab on top (FIG. 15). This became standard after the 1927 earthquake which resulted in the collapse of 1000 rooms. Buildings became vertical three storey structures with no stepwise pattern (FIG. 16).

Details were generally simpler. Decorative gateways continued to be used. New window shapes such as key-hole and segmental arches were introduced. Window surrounds were simpler and more European in character. Corbelling was no longer used and the ashlar became smoother with no emphasis on stone or joints.

Modern Influence (1935-1950)

Towards the end of the 1930s, the growth became slower and as-Salt gradually lost its vitality to 'Ammān. The traditional style started to give way to International Modern style.



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Buildings were built in modern cubical form, using straight lines; they became less urban in character and took on a villa type. Roofs were built of reinforced concrete slabs and beams, and walls were reduced in thickness and made of concrete with smooth "Salt stone" facing (FIG. 17).

High quality of masonry such as refined details based on recessed planes and rectangular architraves were common. Reinforced concrete lintels allowed wider rectangular openings with flat arches for windows and shop fronts. Frames outlined both doors and windows.

From the 1950s Onwards

From the 1950s onwards, the city's importance began to decline. With the loss of much of its human and financial power, many buildings were abandoned, irreplaceable structures were pulled down, and many 'Ammān-like buildings were built of white stone using reinforced concrete frames, causing visual disharmony and bisecting the traditional image (FIG. 18). Wide streets were opened and out-of-proportion masses were added, all of which were composed of rather diverse elements in contrast with the urban nature.

Typology (FIG. 19)

During the various periods of development, several types of plans were used. These were not directly associated with the period they were built in. Nevertheless, the numerous plan forms used can be sorted under main headings, drawing on the distribution of spaces in the buildings and the access to them.

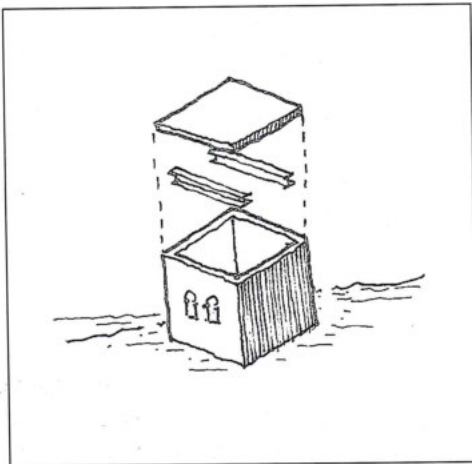
The earliest house type was the "peasant" house, after which urban houses came to be built in various forms; these include the courtyard, foyer and three-bay types.

Due to the topographic nature of the area, many caves existed; additions were made to some of them to form another type.

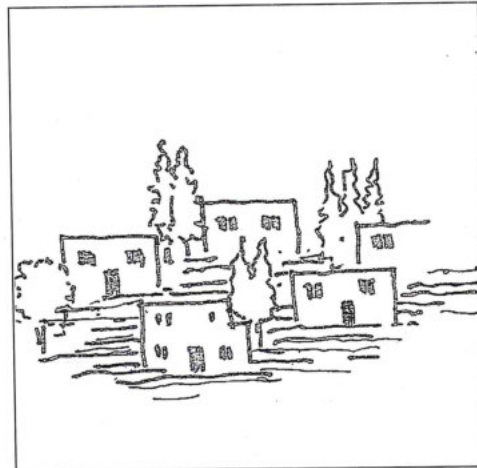
Access to buildings was either through a stairway (public or private), or through an alleyway; both led to a closed or semiclosed space.

During the various periods, institutional buildings were also built (i.e. mosques, churches, schools, shops as well as a hospital).

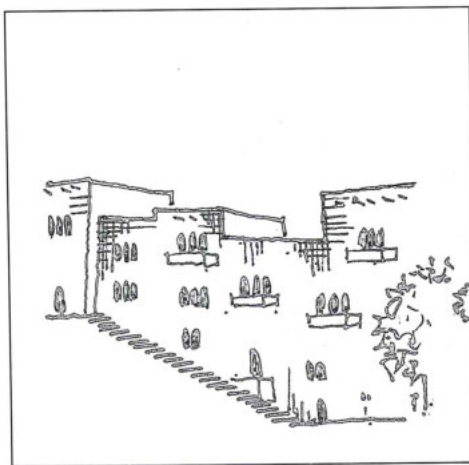
As-Salt is still with us in the here and now. It continues to develop and expand, at a relatively rapid rate with new transformation occurring every day due to development pressure, causing incontrovertible damage to



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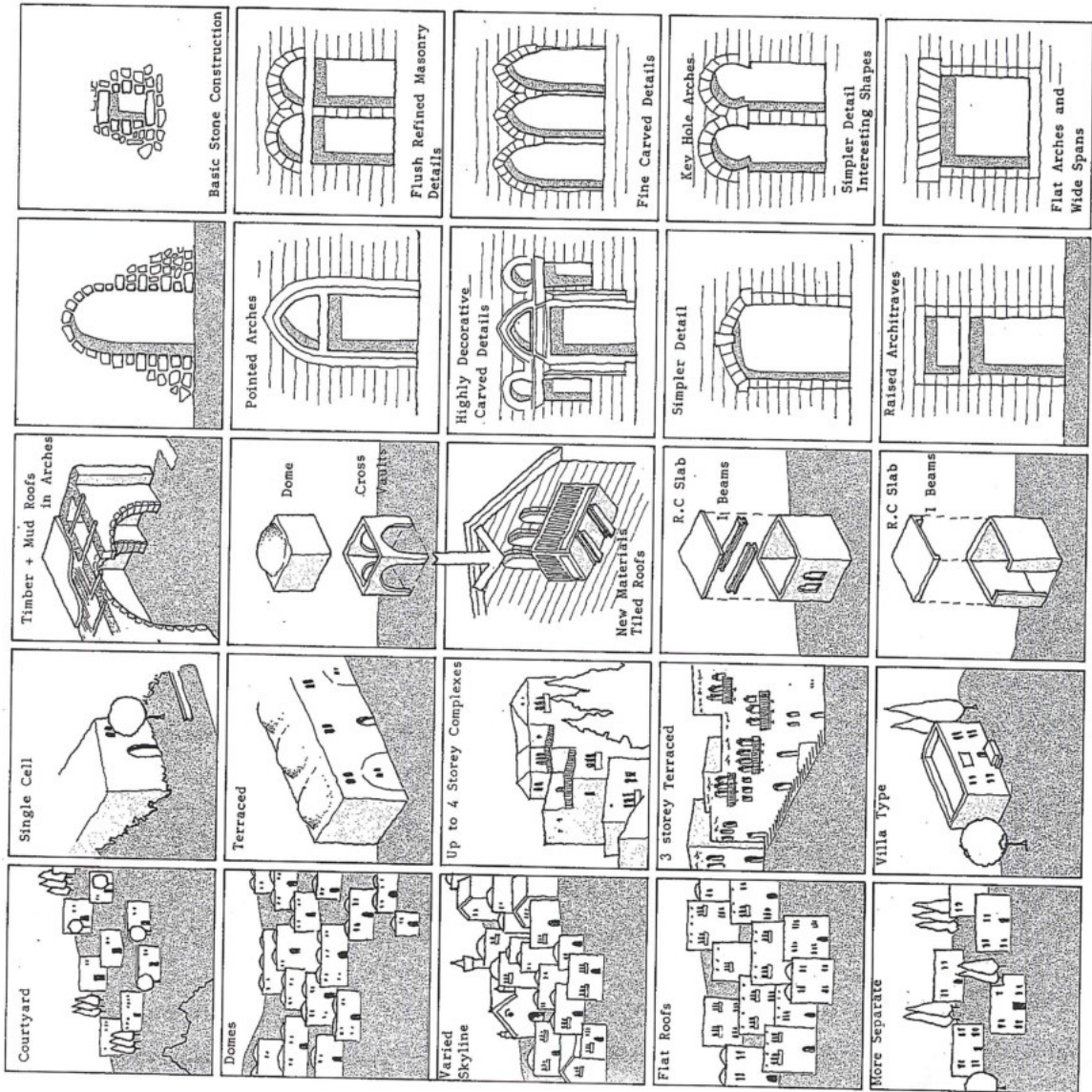
PRE 1866 LOCAL STYLE AND MATERIALS.

1866-1890 REGIONAL STYLE AND LOCAL MATERIALS.

1890-1918 MIDDLE EASTERN + EUROPEAN INFLUENCES,
IMPORTED MATERIALS.

1918-1935 MIDDLE EASTERN + EUROPEAN INFLUENCES,
NEW STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES.

1935-1950 INTERNATIONAL "MODERN" STYLE
INFLUENCE.



the traditional image created by the bustle of the *sūq*, the silhouette of the terraced masses against the sky and all the richness one can never cease to extol.

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