

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is twofold. In part one, it attempts to shed some light on the spatial organization of the different environmental levels in nineteenth century rural Palestine, from the settlements level to the lowest environmental level, that of furniture and objects (Norberg-Schulz, 1971). Part two addresses itself to the relationship between the built environment and social change in rural society.

Deir Ghassaneh, a Palestinian village located in the central highlands - the West Bank today - is the focus of this work. I have attempted to examine the relationship between the village built environment and the social organization of the peasant community that produced it. In part one, the main part of the thesis, I attempted to reconstruct village life as it was at the turn of this century, at a time when the village of Deir Ghassaneh, like most other highland villages, was a relatively autarkic, self-contained agrarian community in which traditional modes still prevailed.

In this section, Palestinian village architecture is examined in the context of its relationship to the social structure of the village community both at the socio-economic and cultural-symbolic levels. The built environment is treated here simultaneously as a historic product of a specific social order and also as an instrument which regulated social reproduction and reinforced social cohesion. The built environment here functioned as both a coordinator as well as a conditioner of a certain social order. The use of traditional architecture is seen in the context of the general use of tradition in fostering the group's continuity and renewal.

In part two, I discuss how the exposure of the country as a whole, as well as Deir Ghassaneh, to western penetration challenged the village's traditional patterns and tended to undermine its fundamental signification. The built environment is examined again in the light of the critical social change that took place in the last half century.