

# **A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO INCORPORATE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF GAZA OLD CITY INTO CONTEMPORARY URBAN FABRIC**

**Dr. Farid Al-Qeeq**

Associate Professor at Department of Architecture, IUG  
Former Director, Center for Architectural Heritage, Islamic University of Gaza  
falqeeq@iugaza.edu

## **Table of Contents**

### **Abstract**

### **1. Introduction**

### **2. Background**

- a. Historical development of Gaza City
- b. Main Historic Buildings

### **3. Main Strategies of Future Interventions**

- a. Challenges facing architectural heritage sustainability
- b. The integration of architectural heritage into the Old City's urban fabric
  - o Development of a traditional tourist loop
  - o Historic buildings adaptive reuse and restoration
  - o Revival of traditional handicrafts

### **4. Conclusion**

### **References**

Jan, 2011

## ABSTRACT

Throughout history, Gaza has been viewed amongst the most important cities of Palestine. The historical center of Gaza city is one of the most prominent sites in the city, as it have the main business activity and contains the major part of the cultural and architectural legacy of the region. Preservation of the genuine architectural heritage turns into a matter of great importance. The study will attempt to establish main strategies to integrate the architectural heritage into the Old City's urban fabric. It is expected that the sustainable approach can be achieved by associating this heritage with its urban context. Thus, the historic buildings will become a part of a touristic loop including the main elements, which create the traditional appearance of the City (Al-Omari Mosque, Gold Market, Pasha Palace, Hammam Al-Samara, and Al-Said Hashim Mosque). The study would also help to suggest the future proposed reconstruction of some previously demolished historic buildings and elements, that would help preserve the historic landmarks of Gaza City.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Preserving the architectural heritage of the community is desirable for many reasons. Culturally, historic buildings remind people of their roots and add depth and character to the built environment. Preserving historic buildings provides a unique identity for urban structure. Older buildings trace unique styles and technical innovations, highlighting the ongoing creativity and ingenuity, as well as reminding people of their distinctive lifestyles in the past. The renovation of historic buildings and sites will increase awareness about the great assets, and encourage the utilization of some ancient architectural elements in contemporary architecture that still need to be more responsive to cultural heritage. Heritage is considered as one of the constituents that preserve culture and national identity of any community. This is because heritage is a witness of accumulating experiences of that community. Awareness of cultural heritage would help in preserving it and achieving balanced environment which reflects both originality of the past and modernity (Al-Qeeq et al., 2009).

Gaza city is considered one of the oldest cities in the world. It was built first during the Canaanite age in 3000 B.C. so that, it has very deep history and civilization. Because of its strategic position between Asia and Africa continents, Gaza was throughout its history a prosperous trade centre. The ancient coastal road linking Egypt with Palestine and the lands beyond used to pass through Gaza, so that Gaza was built and continually developed to become a pleasant place where the traders can take a rest before they continue their trips from Africa to Asia or the opposite (Skaik, 1980).

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Historical development of Gaza City

The known history of Gaza spans 4,000 years. Gaza was ruled, destroyed and repopulated by various dynasties, empires, and peoples. Persians called it (Hazato), while the Arabs called it (Gaza of Hashim) after Hashim Ibn Abd al-Manaf, grandfather of the prophet (PBUH), died there on his return from Syria (MOG, 1996). The oldest known inhabitants of Gaza were the Canaanites (Al-Mubaid, 1995). Old Gaza was built on a hill 45 m higher than sea level (Fig. 1). When the city grew, buildings extended north, east and south (Al-Aref, 1943). It came under the control of the ancient Egyptians for roughly 350 years before being conquered by the Philistines, who made it one of the principal cities in the 12th century BC. In 730 BC, it became part of the Assyrian Empire, and subsequently, that of the Persian Empire. Alexander the Great besieged the city for five months before finally capturing it in 332 BC. The area changed hands regularly between two Greek successor-kingdoms, the Seleucids of Syria and the Ptolemies of Egypt. After its incorporation into the Roman Empire in 63 BC, Gaza was rebuilt under the command of Pompey Magnus. On the breakup of the Roman Empire, Gaza became part of the Byzantine Empire under Constantine I, 324 AD.

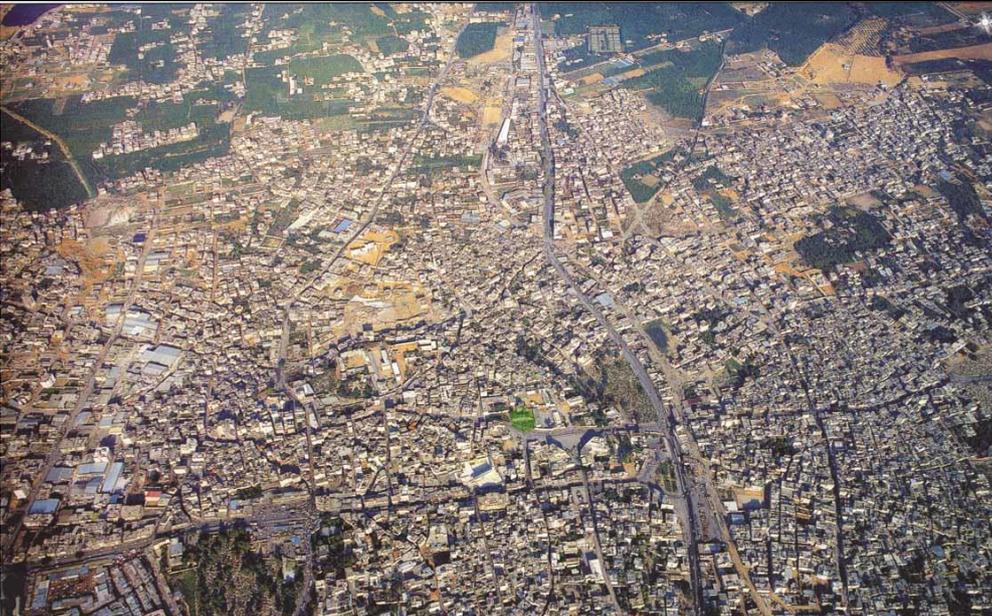


Fig. 1: Aerial photograph of Gaza shows the Old City (Source: MOG)

The arrival of the Muslim rulers in 635 AD brought many changes, and Arabic became the official language. The Crusaders wrested control of Gaza from the Fatimids in 1100, and ruled until 1187, when the city was liberated by Saladin and the Ayyubids. Gaza was in Mamluk hands by the late 13th century, and became the capital of a province that stretched from the Sinai Peninsula to Caesarea. By the time of its incorporation into the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, it was governed by the Ridwan family. In 1799, Napoleon

entered Gaza and stayed three days in the modest palace of the governing Radwan family; is still called "Napoleon's Castle."

In 1917, the forces of the Triple Entente captured the city after a third battle against the Ottoman forces there. The city expanded in the first half of the 20th century under the British Mandate in Palestine, and as part of the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan, Gaza was assigned to the Arab state. The population of the city and the Gaza Strip swelled as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. After the war, it was held and administered by Egypt, until the 1967 Six-Day War when it was occupied by Israel. Gaza was a center of political resistance in the First Intifada, and under the Oslo Accords of 1993, it was assigned to be under the direct control of the newly-established Palestinian National Authority.

Much of Gaza's historical turbulence came about because the city sits on a geographical edge. From here the city served the most heavily traveled trade route linking Central Asia and Arabia with Egypt and Africa, called the Via Maris by Romans and the Horus Road by Egyptians. For traders, pilgrims and conqueror in both directions, Gaza lay, crucially, at the eastern edge of the Sinai Desert, which took eight days to cross by caravan. Most of Gaza's oldest remaining buildings today are Mamluk. To protect the trade that fueled their Cairo-based empire, the Mamluks constructed khans, or fortified caravan hostels, throughout Palestine. Gaza's 14th-century Khan al-Zayt, or (Olive-) Oil Khan, built by Sanjar al-Jawali, fell to the bulldozers in 1960 (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Khan Al-Zait- the Old City of Gaza (Demolished in the 60s) (Source: MOG)

Today, the past endures, scattered amid streets dense with homes and small shops. Al-Omary Mosque is one of the famous archeological sites, located in downtown Gaza at the end of Omar El-Mukhtar Street. Adjacent to the St. Porphyrius Church, the minaret of Kateb al-Welaya Mosque can be seen (Fig. 3). Welayat Mosque is a small historic mosque built by the Mamluks in 1432. The Mamluk maze of arched, covered streets collapsed under World War I's shells, except for a lone, musty passage in Gaza's gold market. The tomb of the Prophet Muhammad's great grandfather, Hashim, still lies in a corner of a 19th-century mosque and former pilgrim's hostel. Several smaller, Mamluk-era mosques and tombs dot Shuja'iyah, Gaza's old Lower Town; one, the

Mosque of Ibn Uthman, is considered to be architecturally "the purest Islamic mosque in Gaza." (Al-Mubaid, 1995)

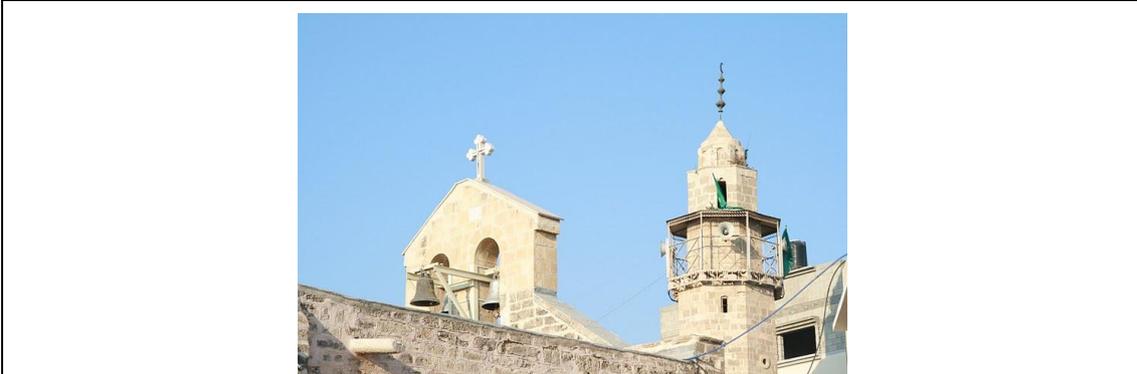


Fig. 3: Greek Orthodox Church of St. Porphyrius & Welayat Mosque (Source: IWAN)

## 2.2 Main Historic Buildings

### 2.2.1 Great Mosque of Gaza



Fig. 4: Great Omari Mosque – the Old City of Gaza (Source: IWAN)

Also known as the Great Omari Mosque is the largest and oldest mosque in the Gaza Strip, located in Gaza's old city in the same area as the Pasha's Palace and the Hammam Al-Samara. The site of the mosque has been the center of spiritual life in the area throughout the centuries. The Great Mosque was finally rebuilt by the Ottomans, and was described by travelers as the only "historically important" structure in Gaza. Severely damaged after British bombardment during World War I, the mosque was restored in 1925 by the Supreme Muslim Council. The Great Mosque is still active today (Fig. 4).

### 2.2.2 Al-Said Hashim Mosque



Fig. 5: Al-Said Hashim Mosque - the Old City of Gaza (Source: IWAN)

The Sayed al-Hashim Mosque is one of the largest and oldest mosques in Gaza, located in the Darraj Quarter of the Old City. The mausoleum of Hashim Ibn Abd al-Manaf, Profit's grandfather who died in Gaza during a trading voyage, is located in the north-western corner of the mosque. The existing mosque was built in 1850, on the orders of the Ottoman sultan Abdul Majid (Fig. 5).

### 2.2.3 Hammam Al-Samara

The name Hammam Al-Samara means "the Brown Bath". The last remaining of five bathhouses in Gaza City, Hammam Al-Samara is a Mamluk-era bathhouse dating back even beyond the 14th century, when, according to a plaque in the lobby, it was restored by the governor Sangar ibn Abdullah. It has managed to retain its vaulted ceilings and inlaid marble tiled floors, and is still heated by a series of wood-fired ovens and aqueducts (Fig. 6).



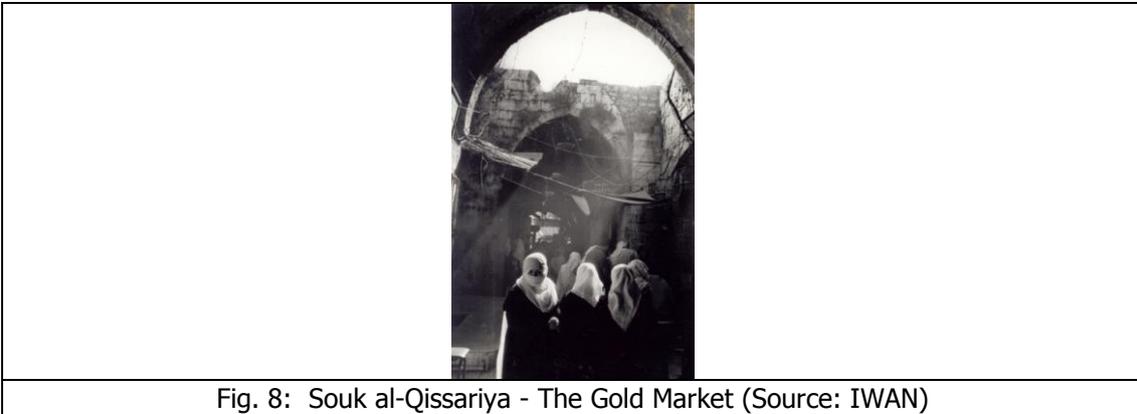
Fig. 6: Hammam Al-Samara (Source: IWAN)

## 2.2.4 The Pasha's Palace Museum

It is one of the most beautiful and most important Islamic palaces dating back to the Mamluk era. Its importance lies in the fact that it is the one remaining palace in Gaza City. It is known as "Radwan's Castle" named after one of the rulers in Gaza, and it was used as a police station during the British Mandate of Palestine. It consists of two floors; there are numerous halls and utility rooms inside the palace, which has now been turned into a museum containing artifacts from different Islamic eras, some of which date back even further (Fig. 7).



## 2.2.5 Gold Market



Souk ad-Dahab; also known as the Qissariya Market is a narrow covered passageway located in the old quarter of Gaza; it is a center for trading and buying gold. The Market lies along the southern edge of the Great Mosque of Gaza, beside the main Omar Mukhtar Street. The Market is configured with a pointed and vaulted roof above the central road, which is lined on both sides by small shops that are themselves roofed by the cross vaults of the covered central road (Fig. 8).

### 3. MAIN STRATEGIES OF FUTURE INTERVENTIONS

#### 3.1 Challenges facing architectural heritage sustainability

Gaza is one of the richest crossroads of cultural history in the region, with many archaeological sites and historic buildings. City of Gaza is thousands of years old and has been inhabited by all the important cultures in the region - Canaanite, Greek-roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Egyptian, Ottoman - leaving behind archaeological sites that are a dominating factor in the region. The whole region has an exceptionally complex and rich cultural heritage and it is of greatest importance to take whatever precautions necessary to avoid destruction and damage to cultural heritage during time of conflicts, as Gaza cultural heritage is threatened by wars and natural disasters. Several historic buildings and sites were completely or partially destroyed during the latest war on Gaza in 2008|2009. Furthermore, preliminary reports of damage to cultural heritage sites, including excavated archaeological sites, are cause for alarm. The majority of destroyed buildings constitute the vernacular heritage that reflects the history of the daily life of ordinary people.

The clearing and rebuilding process that takes place as a result of armed conflict can often be hazardous. Interventions may take place without properly recording the damages to cultural heritage. While it is keenly aware that there are other compelling concerns at times of armed conflict, not least the loss of human life, it is important to stress that international humanitarian law also protects cultural property. It is urged to respect the provisions of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, and its two Protocols, which calls 'not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage' in the territory of other countries (ICBS, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to take the greatest possible care to protect the rich cultural heritage of the region, and to take the necessary preventive measures to ensure that it is not damaged in any way during the present conflict. Culture should be considered as a basic need that is supported by international organizations and governments, and Gaza city urgently needs its cultural heritage to strengthen its identity and unity.

There are still in Gaza strip many historical sites in spite of the aggressive demolition processes undertaken against the architectural heritage. Most of these sites are in Gaza city and specifically in the central old part of it (Al-Mubaid, 1987). This includes: mosques, churches, public buildings and private residential houses. The architecture heritage in Gaza suffers from different dangers that threat its continuity and existence. This includes: demolition, misuse and deserting of historical buildings, in addition to the ignorance from both the public and local authority. It is believed that, if this situation remains for few more years, many historical buildings and sites will be lost and removed from Gaza history. Therefore, all efforts should be combined to save the remaining architectural heritage and to leave it in the best situation for the next generations.

Research shows that decision makers and the relevant competent authorities are strongly willing to see historic buildings protected and preserved against the causes of wearing out and extinction. There is a strong interest to revive the architectural heritage and activate its role as a pride for the community. Local parties concerned with the protection of historical buildings has succeeded in renovating parts of this heritage, such as Al-Omary Mosque, Al-Said Hashem Mosque, Hammam Al-Samara and Pasha Palace (Al-Qeeq et al., 2009).

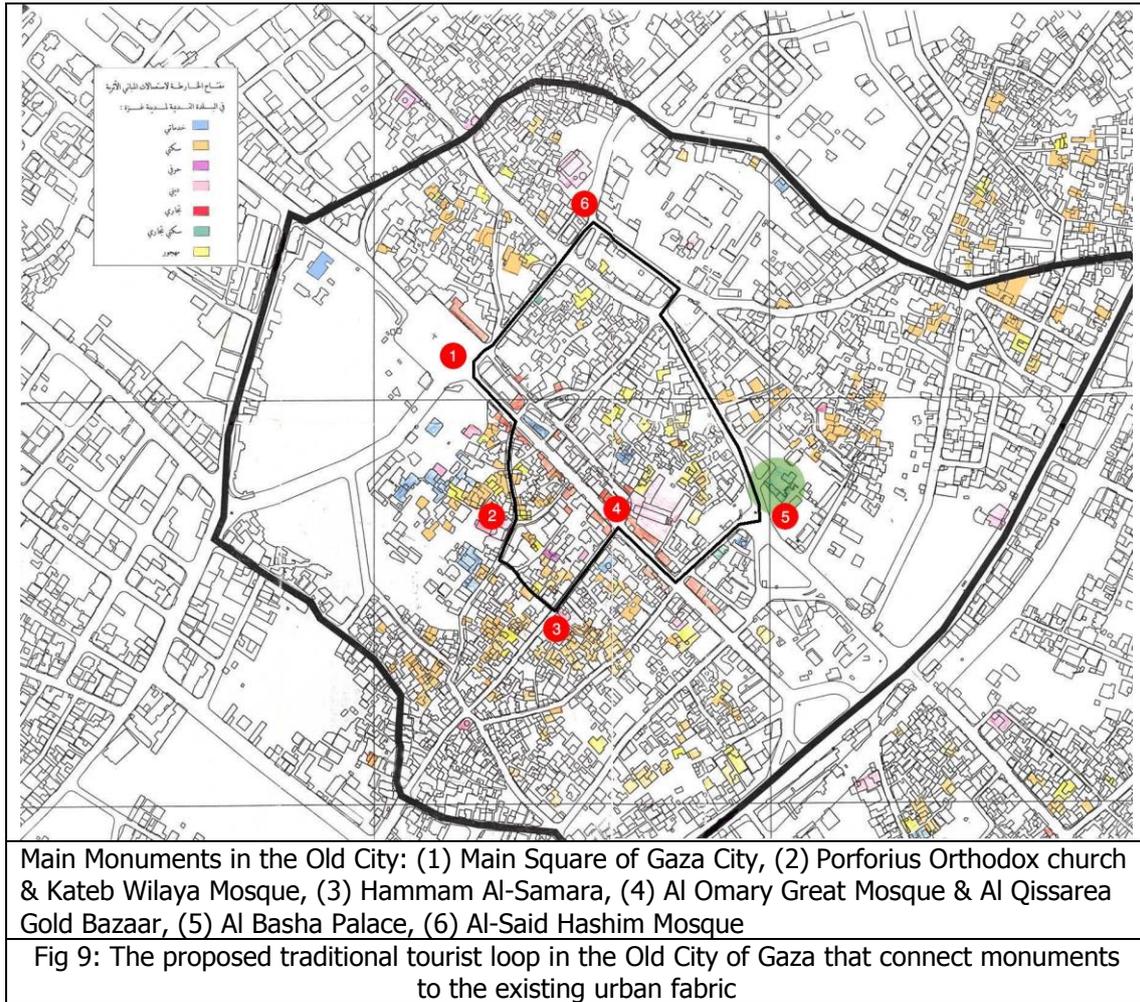
### **3.2 The integration of architectural heritage into the Old City's urban fabric**

The urban fabric is the physical form of towns and cities. The urban fabric – defined as all economic, political, legal and sociological processes whose interactions determine the production of the urban framework (Iddri, 2011). In walkable communities, the urban fabric encourages walking as the primary mode of transportation by ensuring that most people's needs are within walking distance, and providing an environment which is safe and pleasant for pedestrians. Connecting Gaza monuments with the current urban fabric by pedestrian routes can significantly encourage walkable mode in the Old City. With good planning, transit infrastructure can be well integrated with the urban fabric. Cars are accommodated in most walkable communities, but not to the extent that they jeopardize the goals of walkability.

Because of its historic importance, the conservation of historic buildings has to include two complementary approaches. The first one is the preservation and maintenance of the buildings themselves, and the second is the integration of these buildings into the Old city's urban fabric through proper interventions. The following are some of the interventions that aim to the preservation of this heritage and its integration into the Old City's urban fabric.

#### **3.2.1 Development of a traditional tourist loop**

The proposed traditional loop passes through the center of the old town of Gaza and goes by some of the most important historic buildings in the area such as Porforius Orthodox church, Kateb Wilaya mosque, Hammam Al-Samara, Al Omary Great mosque, Al Qissarea gold bazaar, Al Basha palace and Al-Said Hashim Mosque (Fig. 9). These distinguished buildings are separated by a scattered and newly constructed urban tissue that affects the original character of the historic buildings and the area. Therefore, previously demolished historic buildings can be reconstructed to enrich heritage elements in the Old City, especially those located in the vicinity of the traditional loop, such as Khan al-Zayt (Fig. 2).



The proposed scheme is to create a traditional loop inside the old town that goes through the mentioned historic buildings and passes through the main square of Gaza city (Al-Sahaa' or Palestine Square). Palestine Square could be the start point of this loop, as it has a good link to local transport and encompasses a lot of commercial and recreational activities. The loop could be boosted by the establishment of souvenir shops near each of the buildings, traditional elements and streetscape that distinguishes the loop from other parts of the area and finally information units and tourist maps and brochures for the old town in general and the loop in particular. The proposed path could be a realm for local cultural and social activities (Fig. 10).

In addition, the proposed plan aims to develop the nearby roads by changing the physical character and buildings facades into a more traditional one. Historical features should be also enhanced through upgrading of the pavement of the roads using traditional patterns and enriching the area with traditional streetscape like lighting units, seats, and other elements to attract more people. Moreover, the project will encourage the property owners in the neighboring area to refurbish their shops to serve the loop activities and to match with the new conception of urban spaces. Furthermore, the adjacent buildings' frontage and important entrances are worthy of protection. The



In addition, in the pursuit of sustainable development, communities have much to gain from adaptively reusing historic buildings. Bypassing the wasteful process of demolition and reconstruction alone sells the environmental benefits of adaptive reuse. The economic benefits of adaptive reuse versus demolition of our historic assets can be enormous, as it can also be important to developing tourism. Environmental measures, combined with energy savings techniques can make adaptive reuse of historic buildings an essential component of sustainable development. There are many societal benefits to adaptively reusing our buildings. Abandoned buildings and vacant lots drive down property values, create a sense of economic decline and hopelessness, and invite crime. Reusing of historic buildings maintains the character of our cities and bolsters our civic pride. Historic buildings with lower values and old private houses can be more suitable to adopt this approach with appropriate new functions that can stimulate the core of the old city and the loop surroundings.

Local people should be encouraged to visit the area to help in increasing the awareness of Palestinian community towards cultural heritage as a major step of the conservation of such heritage. Exhibitions inside historic buildings should be held for artifacts and handicrafts and relevant publications (e.g. postcards, signs, brochures, booklets, photographs, etc.). This project can improve the skills of those who are considered as good candidates for handicrafts professionals. Raising public awareness of the cultural heritage may include the development of new web resources by providing means of remote engagement with the cultural heritage. These may range from simple image-rich web sites to sophisticated three-dimensional virtual reality visualizations, including sound and lighting effects (Fig. 11). Digitized techniques can also be used to virtually illustrate heritage elements that have been demolished or disappeared in the past. For example, a virtual reconstruction of Khan Al-Zait and the surrounding area can provide a complete vision of the urban fabric of the Old City. These methods provide excellent frameworks for improving access to Gaza architectural heritage.

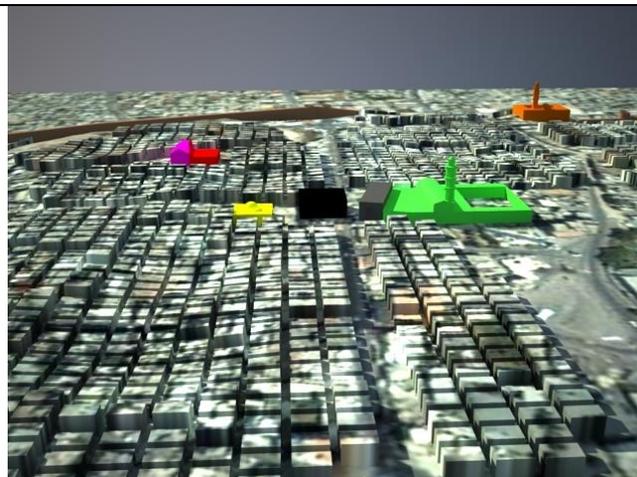


Fig. 11: 3D Visualization of Gaza Old City

### 3.2.3 Revival of traditional handicrafts

The revival of traditional handicrafts should be supported to ensure the protection of the cultural expressions and development of creative and cultural industries. Also the revival of the old traditional form of handicrafts raising communities' awareness of the importance of this heritage and creating many job opportunities. This will led to the promotion of cultural and creative industries through participation of local artisans in different international exhibitions. Additionally, it will enhance the understanding of local artisans in using locally available materials, designs, production and management through providing practical seminars. After all, the revival of traditional handicrafts and cultural environment will need a great social support.

Gaza as other old towns in the area used to be famous with its traditional handicrafts that played a role in both physical and socio-economic life of its citizens. The famous handicrafts in Gaza are pottery, glass, bamboo, embroidery and textile. Other handicrafts were also used in construction such as works of wood, copper, iron, gypsum and other construction materials (Al-Qeeq et al., 2009). The invasion of modern materials and techniques has caused the vanishing of handicrafts and the stop of profession succession from the father to the son except few cases in which there are some artisans still hardly fight to keep the handicrafts alive. The proposed project aims not only to the revival of traditional handicrafts in Gaza, but also to encourage their use in buildings and social life in the city. It includes the establishment of work spaces adjacent to the historic center and alongside the access roads and loop surroundings. The work spaces are for artisans to produce products and to train interested trainees to follow up the production and development of the handicrafts. Several exhibitions for the products could take place in the ground floor of nearby stores.

## 4. CONCLUSION

It is essential to preserve the urban heritage of the Old City of Gaza to develop it economically and culturally and to ensure balance between urban heritage preservation and requirements of contemporary development and planning with concern on national and regional architectural style. The proposed traditional loop will make the architectural heritage an integral part of the structure of cultural, economic, and physical symbol of Gaza city. It will also identify and define the basic elements of architectural heritage in the City, taking into account the local environmental and cultural elements joined in the physical character. The architectural heritage in the vicinity of the loop will be considered as "memory of communities". Social activities should be encouraged through stimulating traditional art programs within the investment projects related to the establishment of the traditional loop.

It is necessary to develop specific guidelines for urban heritage preservation in the City, including agreed definitions for urban, cultural, and natural heritage elements. Heritage should be employed in all its natural, cultural, and urban aspects as an economic source within the sustainable developmental plans. Architectural Heritage should be integrated in local planning systems in general and in the tourism development in particular. In addition, the new buildings in the old city should emphasize the concept of "What we build today is a heritage for the next generation."

It could be concluded that Gaza architectural heritage is of a vital importance at national, regional and local levels. It has an influencing cultural, social, architectural and historic importance. Therefore, the conservation of this heritage is an urgent need and should be on the top priorities of Palestinian society. Local communities should be engaged in programs of urban heritage preservation and rising awareness on the cultural and economic importance of urban heritage amongst government authorities in collaboration with public and private sectors in order to make a real shift towards enhancing urban heritage's values in the society. The conservation of historic buildings should include, not only the maintenance and preservation of its spaces, but it should also include the responsible integration of these buildings into the Gaza old city's urban fabric. The proposed interventions will help to revive the original character of the old city of Gaza, activate social, cultural and economic activities and emphasize the architectural heritage as a dominant component of Gaza urban structure.

## REFERENCES

1. Al-Qeeq, F., Almughany, N., El-Wazir M. and dawood H, 2009. "Sustainable Approach to Integrate Samarah Bath into the Gaza Old City's Urban Fabric". Damascus Conference: HAMMAM, Aspects and Multidisciplinary Methods of Analysis for the Mediterranean Region, 13th to 16th of July 2008 - The Paper will be published in the next issue of IJAR SPECIAL ISSUE ON HAMMAMS in March.
2. Al-Aref, Aref, 1943. History of Gaza. Orphan House for Publishing, Jerusalem, Palestine.
3. Al-Mubaid, Saleem, 1995. Islamic and Historic Buildings in Gaza City and the Gaza Strip. General Egyptian Assembly for Books, Cairo, Egypt.
4. Al-Mubaid, Saleem, 1987. Gaza and its Strip. General Egyptian Assembly for Books, Cairo, Egypt.
5. Iwan - Center for Architectural Heritage, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Islamic University of Gaza.
6. ICBS, 2009. "International Committee of the Blue Shield". Cultural Heritage in Gaza Damaged and in Great Danger. The Netherlands, 2009. Available at URL: <http://archive.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/icbs-gaza-statement18-02-2009.pdf>
7. Iddri, 2011. "Institut du développement durable et des relations internationales". Urban Fabric. Available at: URL: <http://www.iddri.org/Themes/Urban-Fabric/>. Accessed on Jan 21, 2011.
8. MOG - Municipality of Gaza, 1996. Specific Plan of Gaza City, Gaza, Palestine.
9. Skaik, Khalil, 1980. Gaza Through History, First Part. General Egyptian Assembly for Books, Cairo, Egypt.