

THE OTTOMAN BUILDING IN THE *BOVEREL* QUARTER, 'AKKO

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The Ottoman building in the Old City of 'Akko (Plot 18012, Parcel 43; Figs. 1, 2) belonged to the Afifi family until 1948 (see Stern, this volume: Fig. 1), after which it was used by WIZO as a kindergarten (M. Zahara, pers. comm., 1994), and known since as the 'WIZO House'. In 1990, the Old Acre Development Company initiated the marketing of the building (and of the adjacent Shukri Building; Plot 18012, Parcel 45) for renovation as a hotel. This entailed the preparation of a documentation report by the author, on behalf of the IAA Conservation Department, as a basis for its conservation. At the time, the building was not occupied, and its condition quickly deteriorated. In 2003, Uri Jeremias purchased the building and began its renovation as a hotel, which finally opened in 2012.

THE CENTRAL-HALL HOUSE TYPE

The Central-Hall House is a vernacular-type building that developed in Lebanon from the *iwān* house, which is considered "the Lebanese house *par excellence*" (Ragette 1974:92). This building type appeared in Palestine in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Fuchs 1998b) in 'Akko, Yafo (Jaffa), Haifa and Nazareth, and it achieved a high degree of formality, becoming a distinct feature in the Palestinian towns at the turn of the twentieth century. Some 120 houses of the Central-Hall House type, with several variations, were documented in the Old City of 'Akko (Milstein and Fuhrmann-Na'aman 2005). The fact that about 12% of the total number of houses in the Old City are of this building type emphasizes its significance in shaping the urban character of the city.

Three main elements define the Central-Hall house: a central hall surrounded by rooms on two or three sides; a symmetrical house facade with a large triple-arch window in the center, corresponding to the central hall; and a timber-frame roof, usually a hip roof covered with tiles. The house often had two floors with a symmetrical composition: a vaulted service on the ground floor, and living quarters with a central hall on the first floor.

The central-hall scheme was widely adopted by the end of the nineteenth century, when Western influence began to be felt in Palestine. The free-standing villas replaced the traditional architecture comprising closed clusters of houses around a courtyard (*hosh*).¹

¹ The plan of the Central-Hall houses in 'Akko had to accommodate to the crowdedness within the walled city; therefore, the houses were often built atop earlier courtyard-centered complexes.

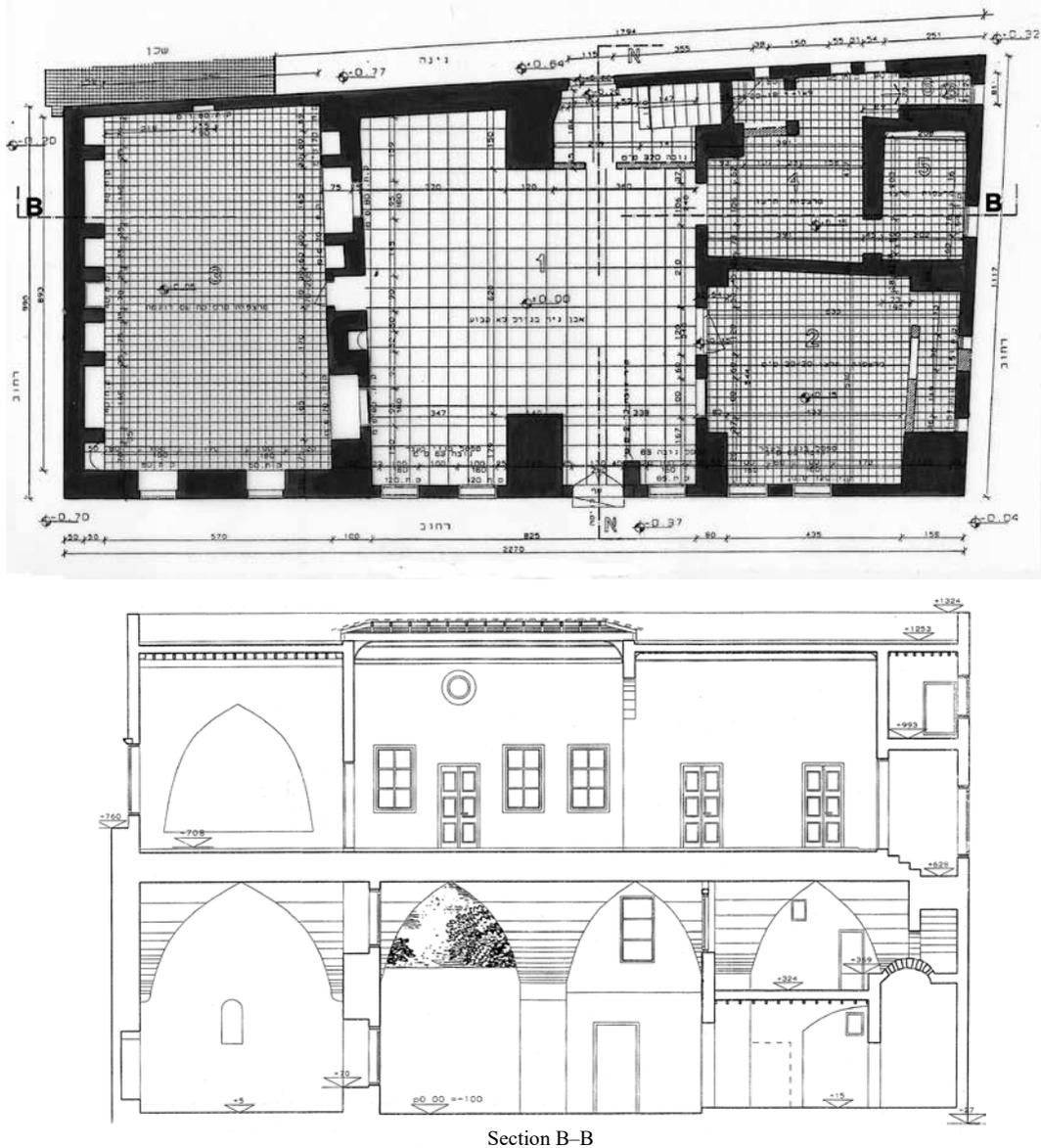


Fig. 1. WIZO House, ground floor, plan and section.

These villas reflected modernization, a developed economy and the emergence of a new social élite (Fuchs 1998b). These changes brought about the reorganization of the traditional space and introduced new building technologies and materials: long timber beams and marble were imported from Turkey (Biger and Lipshitz 2002), and roof and floor tiles, from Marseilles. The light-weight roof construction allowed thinner walls for the upper floor, a large ceiling span for the hall, and large openings for the triple-arch window (Ragette 1974). The interior was lavishly decorated with marble floors, and painted walls and ceilings.

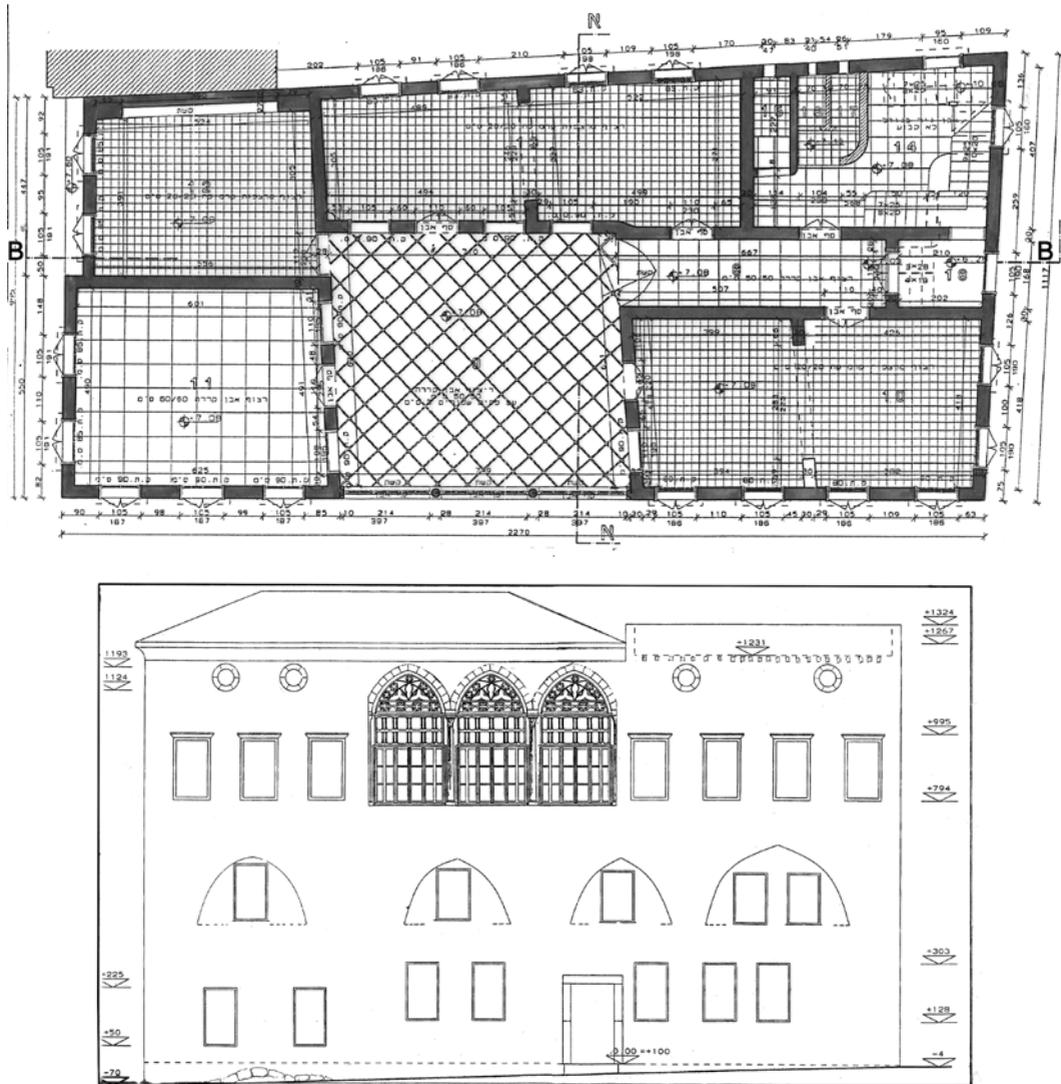


Fig. 2. WIZO House, first floor, plan and western facade.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDING

The WIZO building is one of the finest examples of Central-Hall Houses in 'Akko. It is a typical two-story rectangular block. The ground floor may be defined as an *iwān* plan (Fuchs 1998a) with a large central vault, over 6 m high, flanked by vaulted rooms on both sides, including a small *ḥammām* in the southeastern room (Fig. 1; see Stern, this volume: Figs. 24, 25). This story was probably used as a service floor for cooking, storage and washing facilities. A staircase in the southeastern corner ascends to the upper floor and the roof.

A corridor on the upper floor leads into the central hall (10.0 × 6.3 m), on the western side of the building, facing the sea (Fig. 2). The corridor, central hall and northwestern room

(5 × 6 m) were furnished with light gray marble floors and painted ceilings, supported by the timber-frame construction of the hip roof. These spaces were used for hosting guests and formal functions, while the other five smaller rooms (c. 4 × 5 m) were multi-purpose living rooms. The floors of the living rooms were originally paved with terracotta tiles, and the ceilings were made of wooden beams that supported a flat roof.

The building is totally free-standing with four facades, which is unique in the Old City of 'Akko. The main facade faces a narrow alley to the west (Fig. 2; see Stern, this volume: Fig. 2). Two rows of double-sided hung windows provide air and light to the ground floor. The upper floor facade is almost symmetrical, with the central hall well-accentuated by a dominant typical triple-arch window, which is elaborately decorated. The sliding sash-windows of the lateral rooms had outward-opening wooden shutters; above them are round ventilation windows with intricate patterns. A zinc cornice with wooden ornaments decorated the hip roof on the northern part of the facade.

CONCLUSIONS

No historical evidence was found for dating the WIZO House, and we can only rely on the building typology and on information gleaned from historical maps of 'Akko to make some general observations. It appears that the building was built in two stages.

In Symonds' Map of 1843, the area of the building is marked as occupied with a building, which resembles the current layout of the WIZO building (Fig. 3; Symonds 1843: Pl. 9). From this we may conclude that the first stage of the building, the ground floor,



Fig. 3. Location of the building on Symonds Map, 1843 (Symonds 1843: Pl. 9).

was constructed sometime between the second half of the eighteenth century, when 'Akko developed under the reign of Dahir al-'Umar, and 1843. The eighteenth-century tobacco pipe found beneath the plaster and between the stones of the wall in the *ḥammam*, supports this dating (see Stern, this volume: Fig. 19:7).

The distinctive plan of the upper floor suggests that it was built in a later stage, sometime in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, before 1918. After World War I, the British introduced new building technologies, such as steel beams and cement; the absence of these materials in the structure suggests that it was constructed earlier.

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