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How can we weave our culture and history as Arabs and
residents of Nazareth into the fabric of our daily lives?

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Introduction

As two individuals born and raised in Nazareth, we became aware of the limited historical awareness of our heritage and culture as Palestinians/Arabs. This led us to explore how culture could be woven into the daily lives of the people of Nazareth. We felt a responsibility not only to preserve history but also to make it tangible, accessible, and meaningful for the local community, bridging the gap between the past and present.

Throughout the development of this project, many questions emerged: What does culture truly mean? What are its components? How do locals experience their daily routines, and how can historical culture be integrated naturally into those routines? How can past experiences reconnect people with their heritage in ways that feel alive, rather than static or museum-like? These questions guided our research approach and shaped the conceptual framework for the intervention.

In the early research phase, we visited numerous archaeological sites, particularly those underground and hidden from the public eye. These visits revealed not only the physical richness of Nazareth's history but also the gaps in public accessibility and awareness. We conducted interviews with architects, historians, and experts specializing in the city's archaeology and heritage. Verbal accounts, however, were insufficient on their own. To form a fuller understanding, we collected visual archives, including photographs, sketches, and paintings, documenting the evolution of these sites over time. This combination of oral and visual research allowed us to visualize both the material and experiential qualities of the city's history.

After extensive research, we identified the site of intervention, defined the functions it would host, and envisioned the kind of experience it could offer the community. We selected an Ancient Roman Bathhouse, a largely overlooked underground space, as the foundation for our proposal.

Building on this, we conceived a public library that merges history, culture, and everyday life, maintaining the bathhouse's original stonework while integrating contemporary elements designed to highlight and complement its historical features.

The project goes beyond the conventional function of a library; it is a dynamic cultural hub that invites the community to engage actively with history. It transforms the bathhouse into a living space where people encounter their heritage as part of their daily experience. By blending memory, continuity, and community, the intervention not only preserves the past but reinvents it, allowing locals to interact with, reflect on, and reinterpret their shared cultural identity. This approach fosters a renewed sense of belonging and awareness, ensuring that heritage is not merely observed but lived.

Chapter one - Research

Initially we knew that we wanted to locate our project in the city of Nazareth since it is a place that we feel a sense of belonging to.

Nazareth, is located in the northern region (in the Lower Galilee), a city with over 2,000 years of history, famously known as the childhood home of Jesus Christ. The city used to rely on Mary's Well, an ancient spring and Roman-era water system that served as a central source of water for residents. Today, Nazareth is the largest Arab city, with a rich cultural blend of Muslim and Christian communities.

Firstly, it was essential for us to develop a broad understanding of the city, its surrounding towns and villages, as well as its main and secondary roads.

Since our focus revolves around culture and heritage, it was necessary to examine both the definition and the multiple layers that it encompasses.

Because culture is such a wide subject, we decided to simplify it by dividing it into several categories: Heritage & traditions, Social & family structures, Language & literature, Music & dance, and Handcrafts & visual arts.

We then mapped significant locations in Nazareth tied to our cultural identity and organized them according to these categories.

Through this mapping process, we discovered that these cultural sites were dispersed throughout the city, with no unifying element connecting them. We also found that there was only one library, located relatively far from the city center.

In addition, we noticed that most of these places focused mainly on the artistic aspects of heritage, often neglecting their historical dimension. Because of this lack of awareness and exposure to the historical side of Nazareth, we felt the need to explore its timeline more thoroughly and examine the different historical periods the city has experienced, beginning with:

1. Ancient to Roman period (1st century BCE–1st century CE)
2. Byzantine period (4th–7th century)
3. Early Islamic period (7th–11th century)
4. Crusader period (1099–1291)
5. Mamluk period (1291–1517)
6. Ottoman period (1517–1917)
7. British Mandate (1917–1948)
8. Nakba & the establishment of the State of Israel (1948–present).

After gaining an overview of these periods, we wanted to highlight their architectural aspects, as each era introduced distinctive features and elements.

For this reason, we explored the city center, looking for surviving traces of these architectural periods. For example, the Ancient to Roman era was characterized by cave dwellings and early village houses, and in this context we encountered several underground sites such as the Basilica of the Annunciation, the Holy Caves, and the Ancient Bathhouse.

As we progressed through this research, we became increasingly drawn to underground archaeology. We visited a variety of sites and artifacts from the Roman and Crusader periods, including the Ancient Bathhouse (323 BCE), Basilica of the Annunciation (1st century CE), Holy Caves (1st century CE), Sisters of Nazareth Convent (4th–13th century), Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation (18th century), and Center of Mary (19th century).

It was fascinating to observe how each site preserved and presented its archaeology, as well as the overall spatial experience they offered.

Surprisingly, many of these were unfamiliar to us, despite being locals. These historical sites were mainly geared towards tourists and visitors, rather than serving the local community.

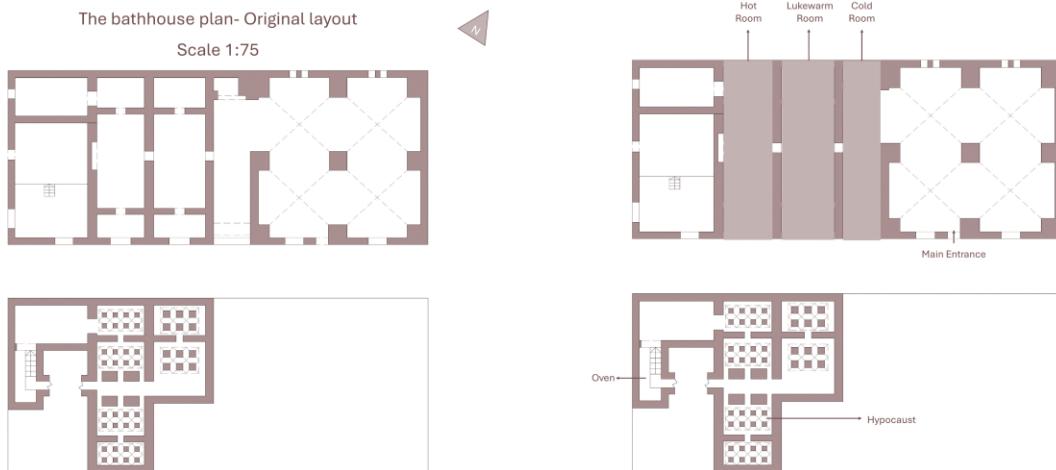
This led us to the idea of integrating one of these archaeological sites into a daily public activity, in order to reconnect people with the city's rich historical layers. We ended up choosing an ancient roman bathhouse as a location for our intervention because the rest of the archeology sites that we have visited were connected one way or another to a church or monastery and we didn't want to disturb a place that had religious attributes to it.

Chapter two - site documentation

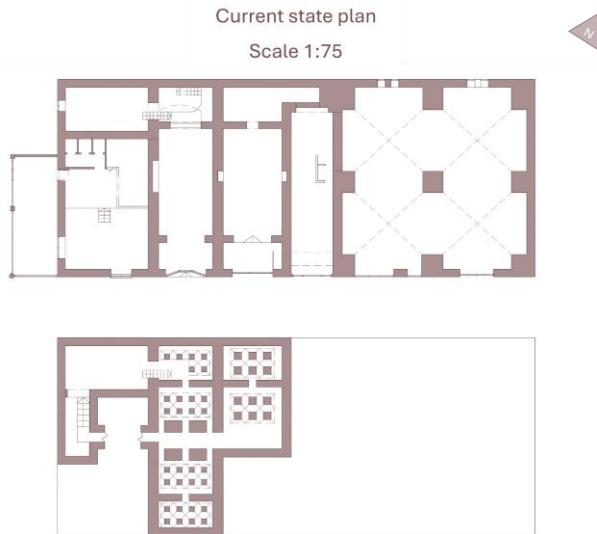
The Ancient Bath House is a significant historical site located in the heart of Nazareth, adjacent to the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Gabriel and near Mary's Well.

We started by understanding how the roman bath houses used to function, its components and the division of each space.

Roman bathhouses were central to public life in the Roman world, serving not only as places for bathing but also for exercise, relaxation, and social gatherings. The experience usually began in the apodyterium, the changing room. Bathers would then move through a sequence of rooms with different temperatures: the cold room, lukewarm, and hot. Behind the scenes, an advanced engineering system supported the baths, with furnaces and the hypocaust, an underfloor heating system, providing warmth and hot water. Together, these components created a carefully designed bathing ritual.



Today, the bathhouse is separated into several functions (a restaurant, a shop, a café, and an unused space), each with its own entrance. The passages that once linked the changing area with the cold, warm, and hot rooms are now blocked.



The initial step that led us to the discovery of the bathhouse was our visit to the archaeological remains inside the store "Cactus." During this visit, we gained further insight into the site through an interview with the owner, Elias Shama. The discovery of this ancient bathhouse dates back to 1993 when Elias and Martina Shama purchased the property to establish a jewelry store. During renovations, they uncovered remarkably well-preserved remains of a Greek-Roman bathhouse beneath their shop.

Archaeological findings suggest that the bathhouse was constructed around 323 B.C. and was in use during the time of Jesus or earlier. Artifacts and architectural features, such as the caldarium (hot room), hypocaust (heating system), provide insight into the sophisticated engineering of ancient Roman bathing facilities.

In Arabic, "Saber" translates to both "cactus" and embodies qualities like patience, endurance, and perseverance traits that Elias and Martina exhibited throughout the excavation and restoration process.

Today, visitors to the Ancient Bath House can embark on guided tours that delve into the site's rich history and architectural significance. The gift shop offers an exquisite collection of authentic traditional embroidery, handmade jewelry, metalwork, and other beautiful works of art, allowing guests to take home a piece of Nazareth's cultural heritage.

This remarkable discovery not only sheds light on the daily lives of ancient Nazareth's inhabitants but also serves as a testament to the city's layered and diverse history.

Since our primary focus revolved around history, we felt it necessary to collect visual records of the ancient bathhouse to trace the site's progression over time. We gathered photographs, sketches, and paintings dating from 1890 up to the present, which helped us understand how the space once functioned.

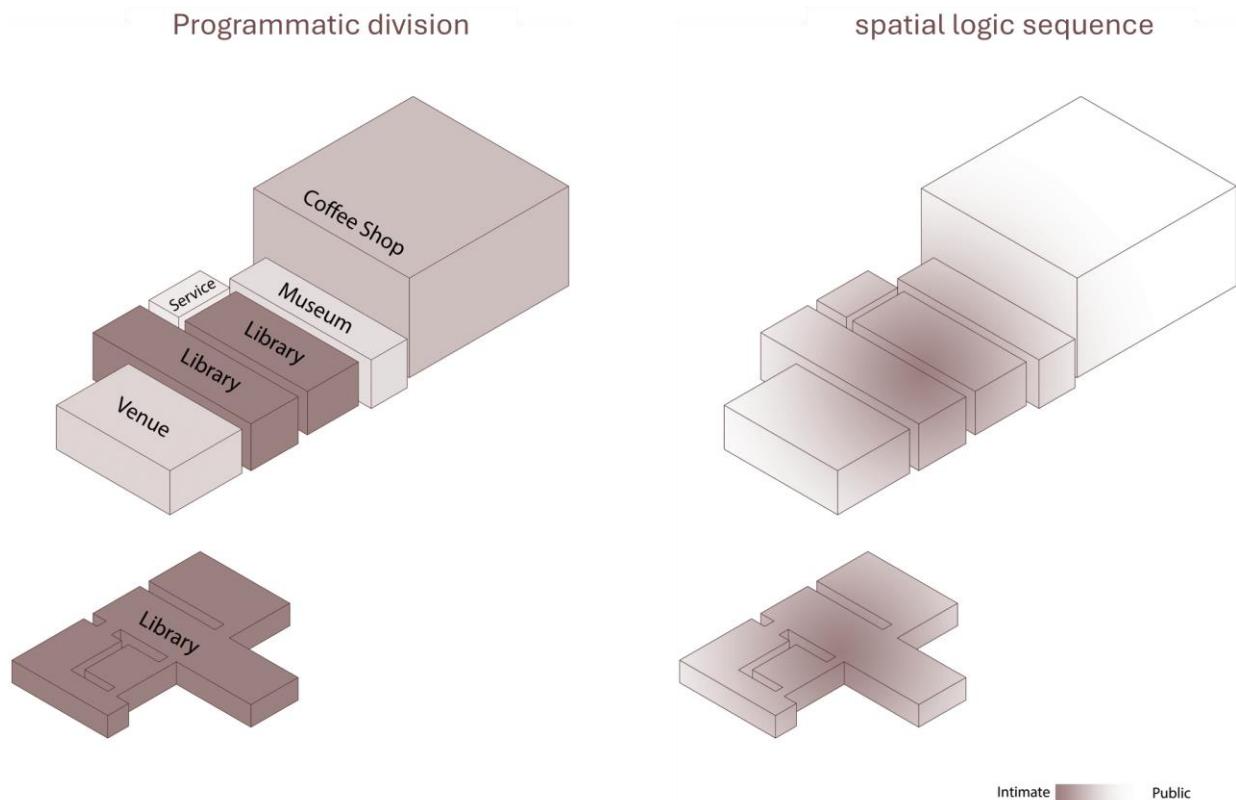
Because no digital archives or documents existed for this bathhouse, we had to reach out to various people, architects, historians, and store owners in order to compile as much information about the site as possible. The most recent floor plan we obtained was from 1997, which required adjustments to reflect the current layout through measurements and 3D scanning.

Throughout this stage, we also focused on distinguishing between the original stonework and the later additions, as our intention was to preserve the authentic stone structure of the bathhouse while removing the newer interventions introduced by each store or restaurant.

Chapter three - Intervention

After collecting all the information, both historical and current, our aim was to preserve the bathhouse experience and its role in uniting the community, while also modifying and adding what we felt was presently missing or essential.

Our proposal envisions a public library that reconnects the people of Nazareth with their cultural and historical heritage. We sought to preserve the bathhouse's original spatial logic, the sequence of hot, lukewarm, and cold rooms and reimagined it as a narrative structure within the new programme. The programme was to combine the community with their historical culture using a daily activity.



The design starts with a coffee shop, serving as the most public space; it is important to note that we deliberately chose to preserve the coffee shop within the building, as it forms part of the locals' daily routine.

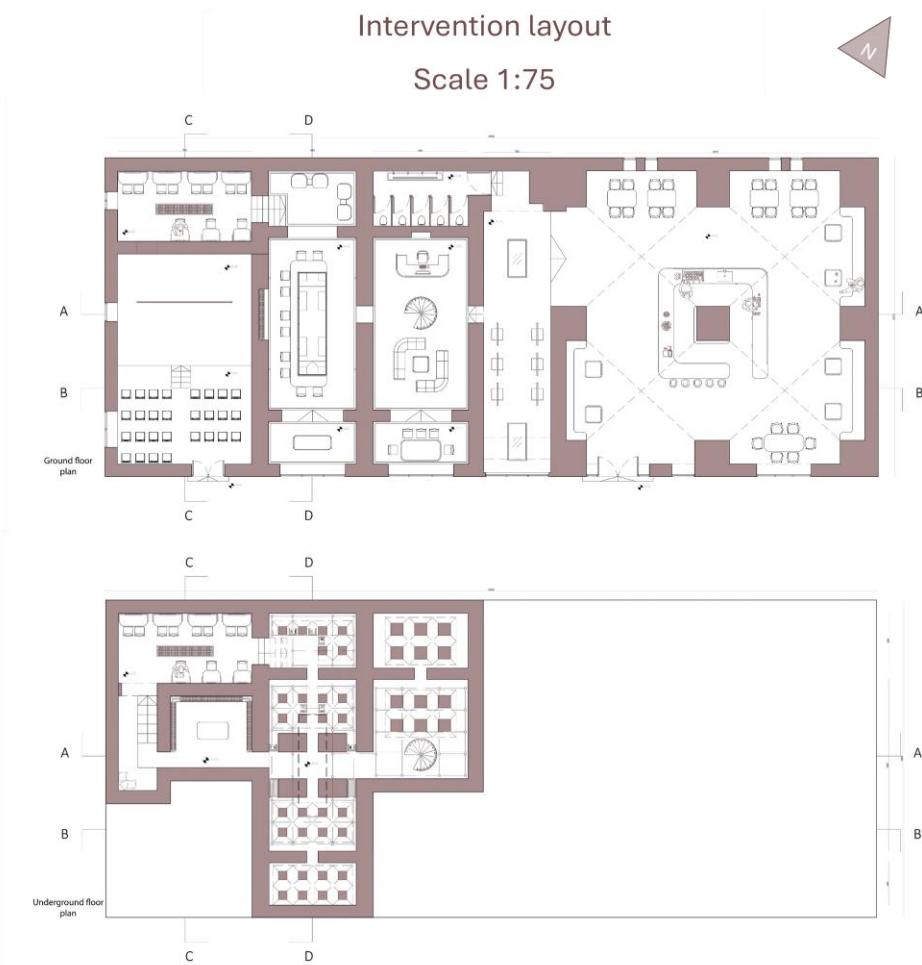
Gradually we transition through a mini museum and into the library area. The library itself evolves from open, communal reading areas into quieter, more intimate zones. This spatial journey peak is in the hypocaust chamber, which serves as both an archive for historical artifacts and storage for rare books symbolizing the merging of personal memory and collective history.

As part of preserving both the experience and circulation of the ancient bathhouse, we positioned each function of our new design to complete the sequence from the cold space, which in our case is the coffee shop as the most open, exposed, and public area, gradually transitioning into a mini museum that offers a glimpse into history and the following spaces. Finally, the hot room is reimagined as the library, a place that reconnects people with their heritage. The library itself follows a gradual spatial progression, from a public group seating area to more intimate, individual spaces located underground.

We retained the main entrance of the bathhouse while closing the separate entries once used by individual restaurants and shops. Furthermore, we reopened the original doors that historically connected the apodyterium, cold, lukewarm, and hot rooms.

In addition to these functions, we included a venue space with its own entrance, dedicated to events. Since this room was not part of the bathhouse's primary sequence, we assigned it an occasional role.

Equally important to us was allowing people direct contact with the underground archaeology and the full immersive experience unlike other archaeological sites we had visited, where remains are preserved behind glass displays or observed from detached pathways. Access to the underground space can be approached in two ways: the first through a spiral staircase, and the second through the back vault leading into the old oven chamber.



The library emphasizes historical book genres, old maps related to Nazareth, and novels about important figures who contributed to the city's history, aiming to reveal the historical dimension to the locals.

The underground path is not only designed for experiential purposes but also functions as an archive. We added shelving units between the hypocaust columns to store special edition books and maps, allowing visitors to access and view them while moving through the underground route.

For the furniture layout, we integrated it to fit seamlessly within the curved stone walls, columns, and niches; in most areas, furniture is centered to maintain clear circulation throughout the spaces. Regarding the furniture itself, we wanted its materiality and design to stand out from the stone walls while also creating balance and cohesion within the environment.

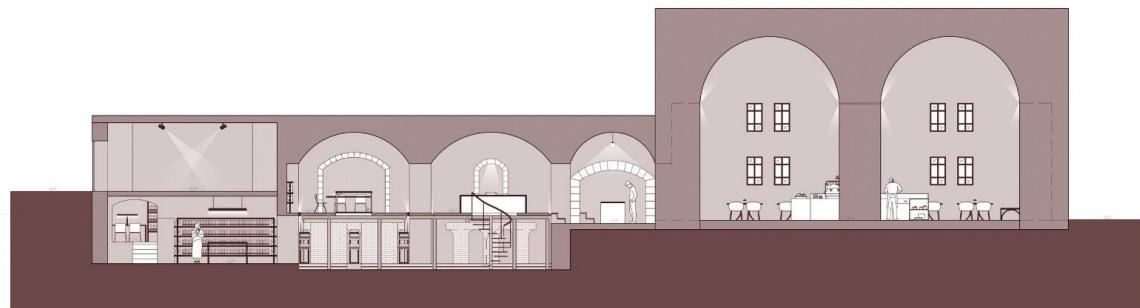
We found that modern pieces with clean, lightweight forms, curved edges, and thin black metal pipe details were ideal to achieve the contrast we sought between the furniture and the stone walls.

The black metal is not only incorporated into the furniture design but is also used in the staircase and the overall structural support system of the building. It should be noted that the floor levels had to be adjusted to create the underground path, requiring a support system of steel beams and columns. The grid was aligned with the hypocaust and the underground route, ensuring that the structure did not disturb the archaeology or the path people take within the hypocaust.

We aimed to create a unique experience within the hot room while maintaining a strong connection to the ground and underground archaeology, achieved by an opening in the central space that provides a view of the hypocaust and underground path. The gap around the floating floor was designed both to protect the stone walls (preventing direct contact) and to highlight the connection between the upper and lower floors, enhanced by a light fixture embedded within the gap that illuminates both levels.

Section A-A

Scale 1:75



Lighting plays a major role in shaping the overall experience within the spaces. The gradual spatial progression mentioned earlier is also reflected in the lighting intensity; for example, the coffee shop is illuminated with bright fixtures to create a sense of openness, while moving deeper into the building, the lights become softer and dimmer, fostering a more intimate atmosphere.

Our intervention emphasizes the interior spaces rather than the exterior. The dimensions of the façade openings were preserved exactly as they are, and the grid ratios were designed to harmonize with the other openings on the upper floors.

Conclusion

Through this project, our aim was not only to preserve an archaeological site but to reframe its role within the daily life of Nazareth. By choosing the Ancient Roman Bathhouse, we sought to shift heritage from being an isolated, tourist-oriented attraction into a living space of culture, knowledge, and community. The transformation into a library and cultural hub allowed us to reinterpret the spatial logic of the bathhouse, moving from public to intimate, from surface to underground, as a metaphor for the layered history of the city itself. The gradation of spaces from the open, social areas of the coffee shop to the intimate, underground reading rooms mirrors the unfolding narrative of Nazareth's history, making the act of moving through the building an experience in itself.

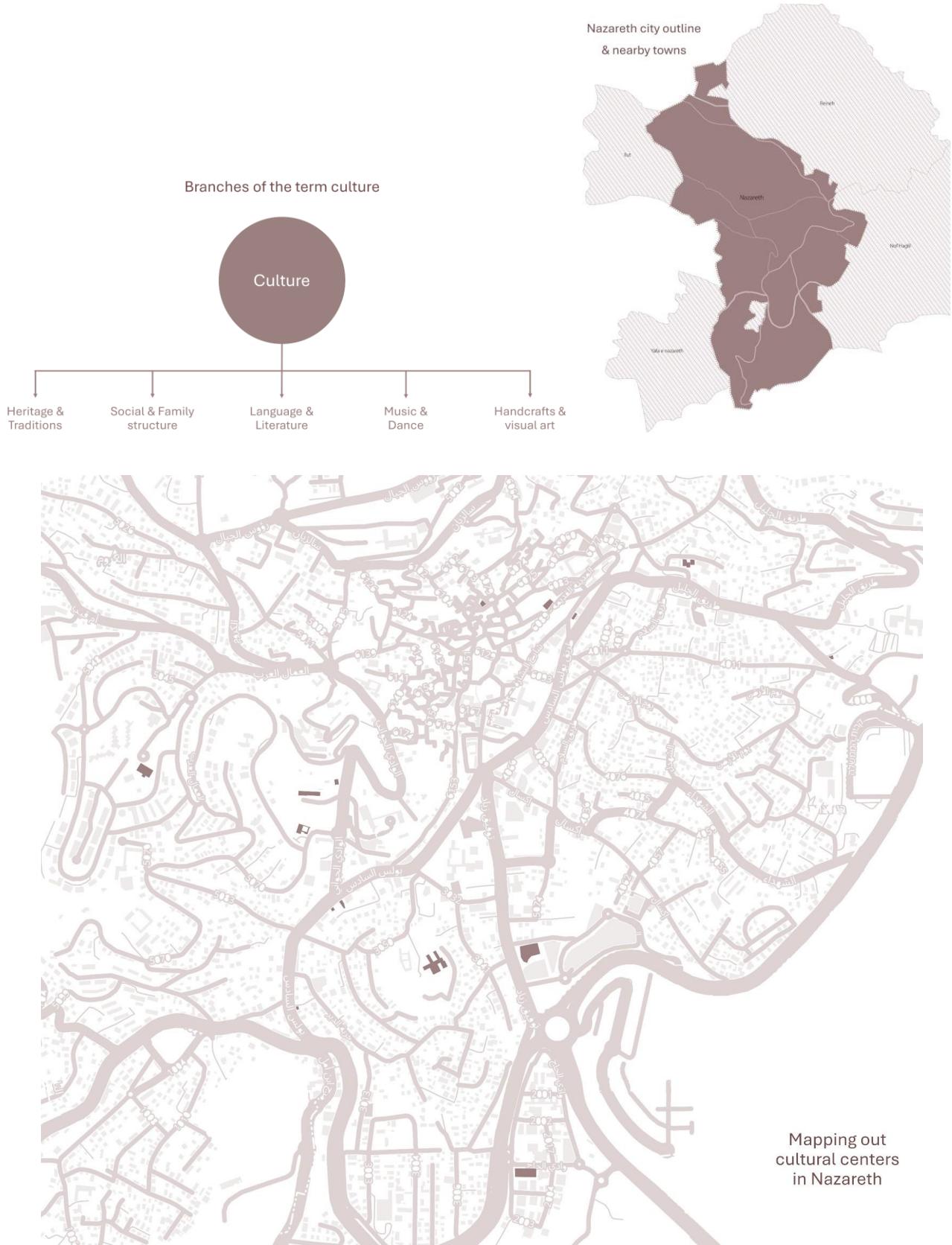
Critically reflecting on this process, we recognize both the opportunities and limitations of our approach. On one hand, the project reclaims a neglected site and demonstrates how archaeology can serve local communities rather than remain distant and inaccessible. The design emphasizes accessibility, interaction, and continuity, ensuring that history is not only observed but actively experienced. On the other hand, working with such a fragile and complex site revealed the challenges of balancing preservation with intervention. Each architectural decision whether adjusting floor levels, introducing new structural systems, or designing contemporary furniture required careful negotiation between respecting the authenticity of the past and addressing present-day needs.

This tension prompted us to reconsider what it truly means to "preserve" heritage. Is it sufficient to protect its material fabric, or must we also revive its social and cultural role? Our approach leans toward the latter, understanding heritage as a living practice that gains value through use and engagement. Integrating the bathhouse into daily life enables the community to inhabit, reinterpret, and reconnect with spaces that might otherwise remain static or solely tourist-focused. While this project alone cannot solve the broader challenges of heritage neglect in Nazareth, it

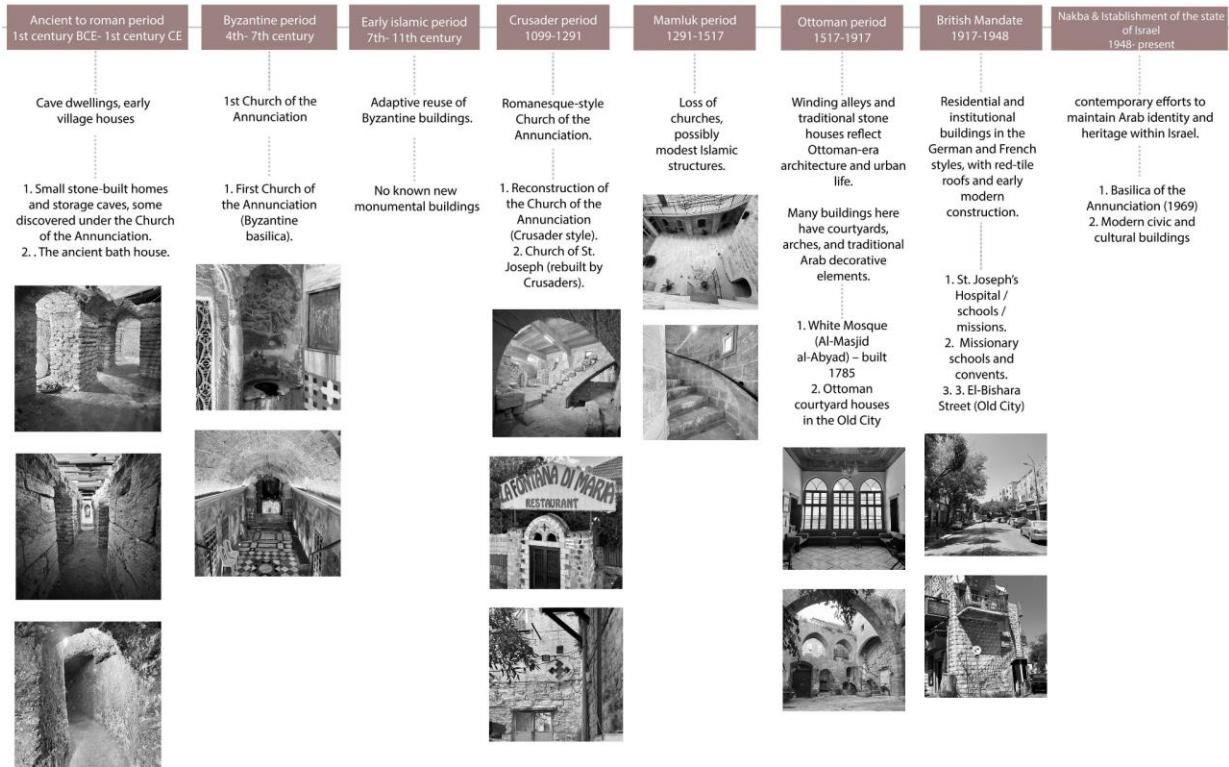
demonstrates how architecture can act as a mediator between history and contemporary life, bridging memory, identity, and daily experience.

Ultimately, the project reaffirmed that heritage is not static but dynamic. It requires reinterpretation, adaptation, and at times, critical disruption to remain meaningful. By reimagining the Ancient Bathhouse as a public library and cultural hub, we aimed to honor the past while giving it a renewed presence in the community, fostering an ongoing dialogue between memory and future generations. In doing so, heritage becomes tangible, lived, and relevant continuously renewed through the engagement of those who experience it daily.

Appendices



Historical Architectural timeline of Nazareth



Underground archeology sites in Nazareth

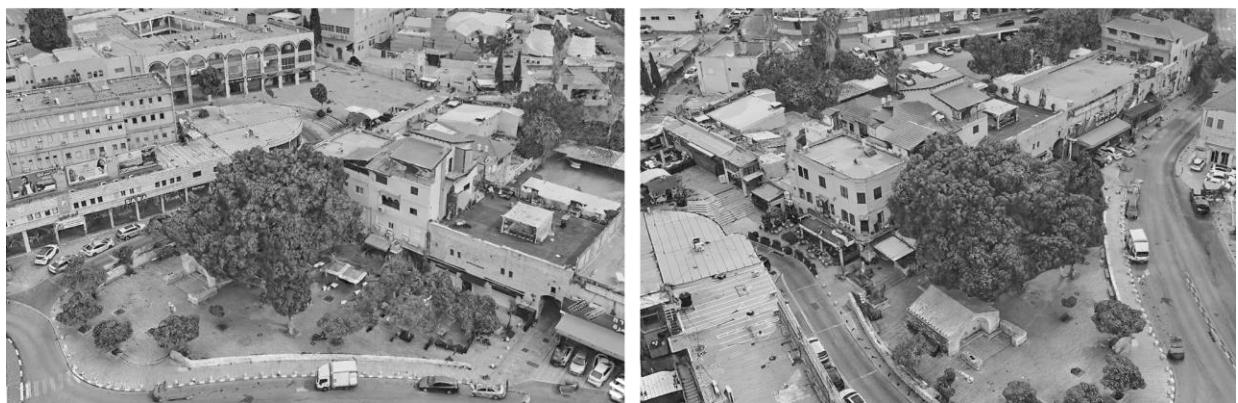


The Building History Archive



Aerial photographs of the site

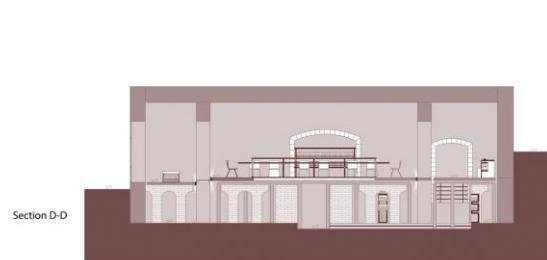
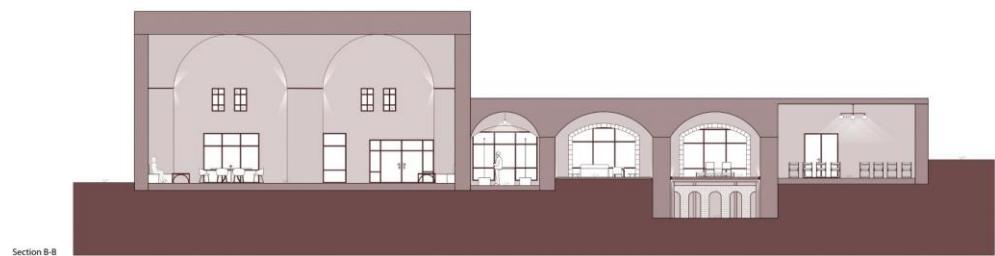
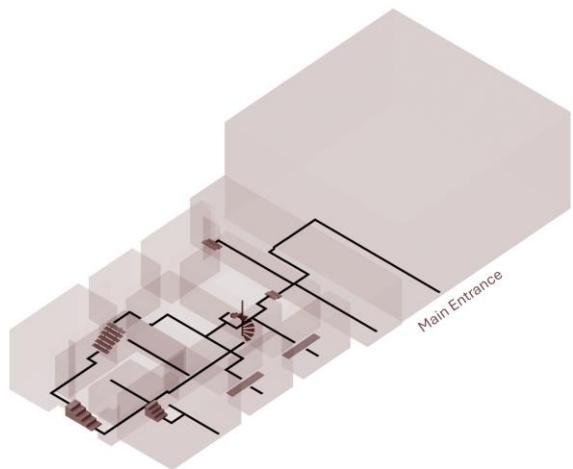
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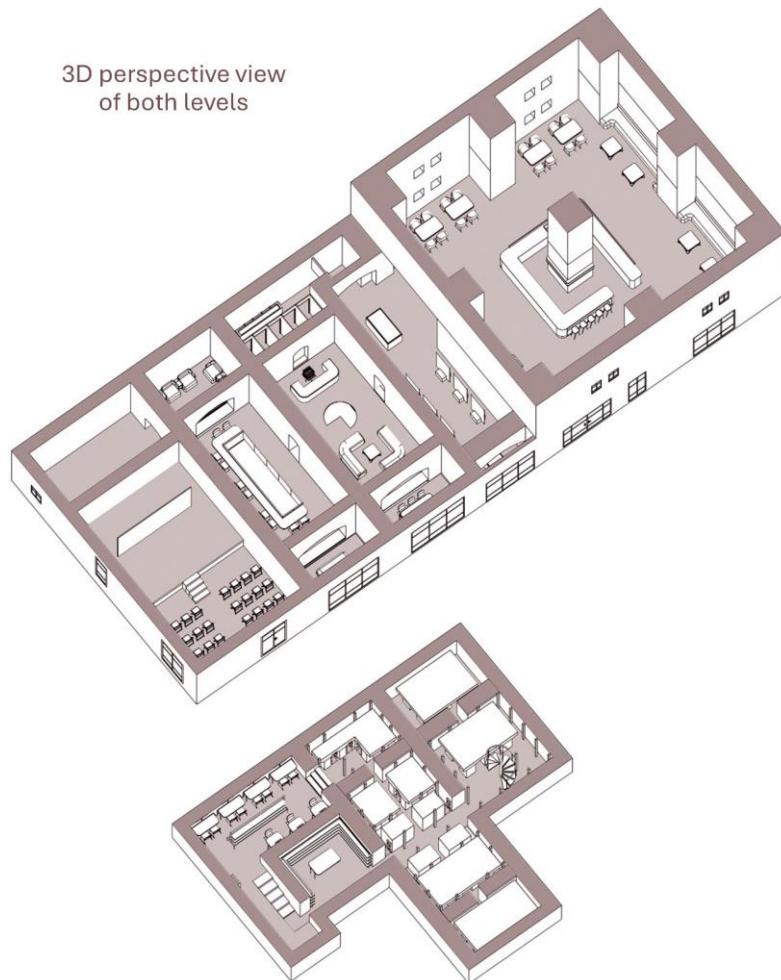
Concept diagram



Circulation diagram



3D perspective view
of both levels



New facades design

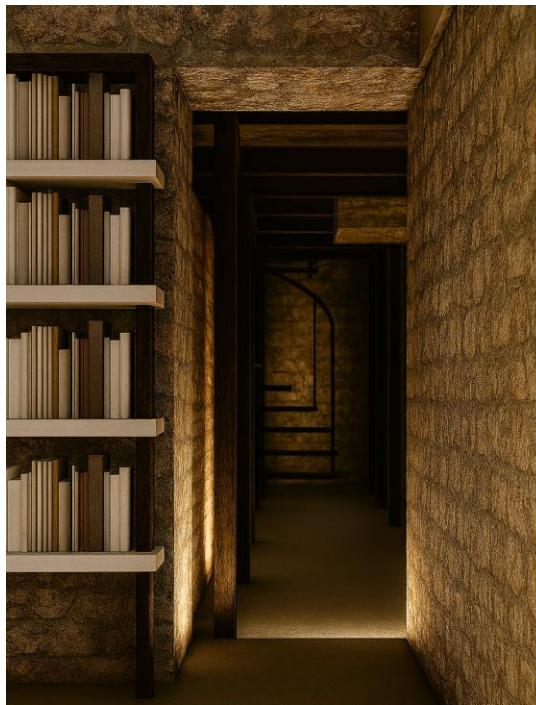




Render - Coffee shop



Render – Library
ground floor



Render –
underground path



Render – Library vault
underground floor

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