Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency

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Architecture after Revolution

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The Making of DAAR
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Our studio, in the town of Beit Sahour, is located near the edge of the desert. From the roof terrace, looking southwest one sees the still ungentrified Old Town with its competing church spires, minarets, commercial billboards for shampoos and mobile phones, and political graffiti for various Palestinian communist parties. Looking north, the hill of Abu Ghneim, once covered by a forest, has been transformed into Har Homa, the nearest of the hilltop colonies separating Jerusalem from Bethlehem. Invisible, in the valley behind the hill, is the separation wall being built by Israel since 2003. Looking east, one can see the sharp line-of-water divide; beyond that, the fields abruptly stop and the uninterrupted monochrome of the desert begins. It is a relief not to have to look at any colony in this direction, but the desert has its dangers too. Here is where the military lurks in training and fire zones, and it is from here that it storms our towns in full armor.
One unusually cold early morning in April 2006, the people of Beit Sahour witnessed, as some of us did, the evacuation of the military outpost of Oush Grab (in English, the "crow's nest"). The army withdrawal seemed to have been the last act in an ongoing struggle of local and international activists against the oppressive presence of the base. Some years previously, on a legendary day, protesters broke into the military base and called for its immediate removal. The soldiers, taken completely by surprise, did nothing but watch. Though the base remained, by 2006 continued strong opposition to its presence by the local community and the concurrent re-organization of military geography had pushed the army to abandon it. The morning after the evacuation the base was overrun with people from around Bethlehem. Relief gave way to cathartic release. Using iron bars, young people smashed windows, walls, and doors. Others tried to salvage and take away whatever they could—doors, electric plugs, furniture, even the steel reinforcement bars in the water tower that stood at the middle of the outpost, leading to its partial collapse. The commotion was incredible, but nobody got hurt.
This was the end of the long life of the site as a military outpost. The distinct topography of the hill—and its location at the edge of a town and the start of the desert—had made it suitable for this role. Before it was an Israeli military outpost, it was manned by the Jordan Legion and previously by British troops during the 1936–39 Arab Revolt. Some people suggested that Oush Grab was an Ottoman outpost before that—though we found no maps to verify this—and even that it was also used by a Roman legion. But besides some canals and scattered archaeological remains consistent with a Byzantine-era farm, we found no proof of this either. During the time of the Second Intifada the sound of gunfire was constantly heard as soldiers practiced shooting, sometimes on the residential buildings surrounding the base. Floodlit during the night, with searchlights constantly scanning the area around it, the base seemed to have been caught in an endless artificial day.

The evacuation of the outpost was surely only a tactical move, a reorganization of the military matrix of control. We celebrated it for what it was—this location is the only direction in which Bethlehem, otherwise enclosed from the northwest by the wall and from the southwest by the bypass road N60, could expand.

No one was under any illusion that this might have been the first stage of decolonization. Still, "something" had taken place—a military base had been evacuated and people had access to it. This moment of evacuation—"nothing" in the grand scheme of things—captured our imagination as it had defied the logic of impossibility and the seemingly hard geography that is prevalent in occupied Palestine, on both sides of the Green Line.
Access and Re-appropriation

People experienced the first moment of access to the military outpost differently. For some, it was a moment of spontaneous transgression. Entering the watchtowers overlooking Beit Sahour, we had the feeling we had accessed the control room in a panopticon prison, sharing for an instant the perspective of the oppressor. Inside the tower, we discovered graffiti (of the kind more commonly found in toilets) written by a soldier musing about the beauty of the sunrise and the atmosphere of the city in the early morning. The access to the military base provided a new point of observation over the city itself. Its evacuation offered local people the opportunity to see their own city from this direction for the first time. For many, it was a strange feeling, similar to that of looking at a recording of oneself and discovering unknown aspects.

Occupying such spaces brought back past experiences. Sandi recalled the time of the First Intifada, when people in Beit Sahour refused to pay taxes to the colonial authorities (a revolt known as the White Intifada): “One night, the army entered my house and confiscated furniture, the television, phones, and, among other things, my precious little radio transmitter. Oush Grab at that time was used as a prison but also as a storage for confiscated goods. [...] Entering the base twenty years later, I thought I might find my beloved radio.”

Having access to the evacuated military base we experienced the most radical condition of architecture—the very moment that power has been unplugged: the old uses are gone, and new uses not yet defined.

Later we heard Palestinian government officials and some NGO people advocating the view that to avoid further “vandalism” in such situations, all evacuated spaces must be defended by a Palestinian police force. If such a thing exists at all, it should certainly seek to protect Palestinians from daily abuse and not impose order where disorder is called for. It would be a mistake to lose such precious moments in spite (and perhaps because) of their indeterminate consequences.
The view from the watchtower in Oush Grab.
Photo: Francesco Mattuzzi, 2006
Only after such initial encounters can collective thinking about the future of this place begin. In 2007, we started to organize "tours" of Oush Grab, planting olive trees and using the watchtowers for bird-watching. This series of events encouraged the Beit Sahour municipality to continue the transformation of the site into a public park with places for picnics, playgrounds for children, a restaurant, a bar, and an open garden for events. Oush Grab is at present the only open public space in the Bethlehem area.

There is another point that must be made before we continue. Our collaboration is grounded in a joint sense of political commitment, friendship, and intellectual curiosity. It is obvious that our backgrounds are different and our identities complex and multiple—even with only the three of us in one room "there was already quite a crowd" (and there are always peers, colleagues, and friends around). We do not think of ourselves as representing anyone, least of all other people that have the same passports as ours. We are fully aware of, and experience everyday the system of separations and control that have been built around us. We don't pretend that they do not exist, but we also don't allow them to limit our imagination. If one day you happen to travel together with us through this bizarre country, you might see how there is, by definition, always one of us with the wrong document in the car when crossing checkpoints. This country is designed for the purpose of separating us.

Beit Sahour

We owe much to this magical town. It makes our fantasies easier. For one thing it is not Ramallah—whose syndrome is the exciting and debilitating "hallucination of normality"—and it’s not even the ecumenical Bethlehem, which draws vast amounts of world attention. Southeast of Bethlehem, it is the last stop before the desert. The town was left alone to develop a special chapter in the history of the Palestinian struggle. Its recent history—which spans our lives—is intertwined with the ideal of borderless solidarity and a secular, democratic, inclusive, non-armed struggle. Since the first years of the First Intifada—with the hardening of identities it brought about—Beit Sahour was the place of a popular resistance, the White Intifada, a campaign of non-armed civil disobedience. The violent repression of the White Intifada also led to the organization of the collective cultivation of empty plots within the town—urban agriculture as a form of resistance. Back in those days, the term "joint" was used to describe the kind of struggle being waged. Beit Sahour was one of the few places where internationals, Palestinians, and Israeli Jews would struggle together against the occupation and colonialism. Today the term "common" is perhaps the more apt to describe the struggle because it does not assume that preexisting, distinct identities are coming together. We need common platforms for a common struggle against a system of inequality and control. These might also become the common political platforms of the future. We will come back to this, particularly in the last chapter. As such, Beit Sahour has also become an inspiration, a place of radical pedagogical experiments. Indeed, during the First Intifada, when schools were closed by a military order, self-organized neighborhood committees established a network of alternative education study groups within homes and car garages, where the reading list included Ghassan Kanafani, Mao, Hanna Mina, Sahar Khalifeh, Trotsky, Naji al-Ali, Karl Marx, and Emile Habibi.

2 http://ramallahsyndrome.blogspot.de/.
3 For example, such struggles took place under the aegis of the the International Solidarity Movement, which was founded in 2001, just a few hundred meters from our studio; the Alternative Information Center (AIC), a non-governmental organization established in 1984 by members of the Revolutionary Communist League (previously Matzpen); the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command; and continue today, through Badil, a community-based organization for the defense and promotion of the rights of Palestinian refugees.
Decolonization

If one insists, as we do, on colonization as the frame of reference for understanding the political reality in Palestine, one should naturally accept that decolonization is necessary. What we have thus far proposed in Palestine could also pose a challenge on a larger scale. We think that decolonization might be the appropriate term for challenging the frame—generally limited to the confines of the borders set up by colonial powers—according to which the series of revolts which took place in the wider region unfolded. The general conceptual question nonetheless remains: what is decolonization today?

Revisiting the term required maintaining a distance from two dominant frames: "revolution" and "solution." Whereas the former depends on a definitive moment, the latter is bound by a fixed end state, and neither designates a long-term process of transformation. The current political language that utilizes the term "solution" in relation to the Palestinian conflict and its respective borders is similarly aimed at a fixed reality. "Decolonization," however, is not bound as a concept, nor is it bound in space or in time: it is an ongoing practice of deactivation and reorientation understood both in its presence and its endlessness. In the context of Palestine, it is not bound within the 1967 occupied territories. Decolonization, in our understanding, seeks to unleash a process of open-ended transformation toward visions of equality and justice.

The return of refugees, which we interpret as entailing the right to move and settle within the complete borders of Israel-Palestine, as chapter one will make clear, is a fundamental stage in decolonization.

Over the past few years, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has been generous in engaging us in conversations about how the concept of "profanation" would be a productive way of thinking through the process of decolonization. In his famous eponymous book on the subject, Agamben proposed "profanation" as the strategy of "restoring things to their common use." The domain of the sacred, according to him, has not disappeared with secularization but has rather been reproduced in modern political formations. In his book, Agamben points out that "to profane does not simply mean to abolish or cancel separations, but to learn to make new uses of them." Might decolonization then be the counter-apparatus to restore to common use what the colonial order has separated and divided? Decolonization as an act of profanation is playful, child-like, and a necessary contrast against actions disposed towards the diverse manifestations of the contemporary sacred—from the militarized security institutions of "Israeli liberal democracy" to the rabbinical theodicy of some of its colonists, from the militant Islamism of Hamas to the quasi-secular authoritarian rule of Fatah in the West Bank.

Destruction

Whatever trajectory the conflict over Palestine takes, the possibility of the further partial—or complete—evacuation of Israeli colonies and military bases must be considered (zones of Palestine that have been or will be liberated from direct Israeli presence have provided a crucial laboratory for studying the multiple ways in which we could imagine the reuse, re-inhabitation, or recycling of Israel's colonial architecture). The handing over of colonial buildings and infrastructure is always a dilemma for the user, for it is torn between two contradictory desires: destruction and reuse. The popular impulse for destruction seeks to spatially articulate "liberation" from an architecture understood as a political straitjacket, an instrument of domination and control. An architecture is a weapon in a military arsenal that implements the power relations of colonialist ideologies; then architecture must burn.

will be organized." For Fanon, decolonization is always a violent event. "To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist's city, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory." The impulse of destruction seeks to turn time backward. It seeks to reverse development to its virgin nature, a tabula rasa on which a set of new beginnings might be articulated. However, time and its processes of transformation can never be simply reversed: rather than the desired Romantic ruralization of developed areas, destruction generates desolation and environmental damage that may last for decades. In 2005, Israel evacuated the Gaza settlements and destroyed three thousand homes, creating not the promised tabula rasa for a new beginning, but rather a million and a half tons of toxic rubble that poisoned the ground and the water.

Reuse

The other impulse, to reuse, seeks to impose political continuity and order under a new system of control. It is thus not surprising that post-colonial governments have tended to reuse the infrastructure set up by colonial regimes for their own emergent practical needs of administration. The evacuated infrastructure and built structures were often also seen as the legacy of "modernization" and as an economic and organizational resource. Throughout the histories of decolonization, the possibility of reusing existing structures in the very same ways they were used under colonial regimes has proven too tempting to resist. Such repossession tends to reproduce colonial power relations in space: colonial villas are inhabited by new financial elites and palaces by political ones, while the evacuated military and police installations of colonial armies, as well as their prisons, are reused by the governments that replaced them, recreating similar spatial hierarchies.

In this sense, past processes of decolonization have never truly done away with the power of colonial domination. The reuse of Israeli colonial architecture could establish a sense of continuity rather than rupture and change. That is, reusing the evacuated structures of Israel's domination in the same way as the occupiers did—the settlements as Palestinian suburbs and the military bases for Palestinian security needs—would mean reproducing their inherent alienation and violence: the settlement's system of fences and surveillance technologies would inevitably enable their seamless transformation into gated communities for the Palestinian elite.

Subversion

There is, however, a third option: a subversion of the originally intended use, repurposing it for other ends. We know that evacuated colonial architecture doesn't necessarily reproduce the functions for which it was designed. There are examples of other uses, both planned and spontaneous, that have invaded the built environment of evacuated colonial architecture, subverted its programs, and liberated its potential. Even the most horrifying structures of domination can yield themselves to new forms of life. Looking at the fractured remains of a plantation house, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott pondered the decay of an institution once powerful, and wondered about "the rot that remains when the men are gone," but he also opened ways to negotiate, inhabit, and thus transform the colonial structures that have generated deep deformations of space and geography. Colonial remnants and ruins are not only the dead matter of past power, but could be thought of as material for re-appropriations and strategic activation within the politics of the present. The question is how people might live with and in ruins, or, as we put it in chapter three, "within the house of the enemy."

There are examples of other planned and spontaneous uses. Some examples relate to the most horrific of histories. At least two former World War II concentration camps have been the location of major re-adaptation. The prisoner-of-war camp Fossoli in Carpi, northern Italy, was used as a concentration camp for Jews who were imprisoned there before their deportation to the death camps in Eastern Europe. Two years after the end of the war the priest Zeno Saltini opened an orphanage there, which was in operation until 1952. The walls and barbed wire were pulled down, and the barracks were transformed into living quarters, a school, workshops. Trees, gardens, and vegetables were planted. The camp watchtower was transformed into a church.

Another interesting case in which a camp was transformed was that of Staro Sajmište in Belgrade. Built as a fairground in 1936 it had a series of national pavilions built around a central tower. The area had fallen into Nazi hands at the start of World War II. The visual order of the exhibition suited the new logic of surveillance and control. After the war, the site was occupied by artists and Roma people. The circular layout of the camp has thus been interpreted in radically different fashions three times: as a display mechanism, a site of incarceration and murder, and then a site of renewed communal life. Now the residents of Staro Sajmište (those who inhabited and, to a certain extent, protected the site) are under the threat of eviction as the Belgrade municipality seeks to build another form of exhibition—this time commemorating the Shoah.

Within the context of decolonization, one might look to Gandhi's principle of non-violent non-cooperation. His principle had an important architectural dimension. He suggested reusing structures saturated with violence after the violence could be "removed." In Delhi, after the Viceroy's House was evacuated, Gandhi wanted to turn it into a hospital. But Nehru insisted on turning the building into the President's Palace, thereby reproducing colonial hierarchies.

Al-Muqata in Ramallah is an interesting example of the potential and the trap of reusing colonial and military structures. The military compound was built by the British military as part of the larger campaign to suppress the Arab Revolt of 1936–39. From 1948 to 1967, it was used as a military base and prison by the Jordan Legion and for the same purposes by the Israeli army after 1967. Its history as a site of incarceration was, however, interrupted for a few months when the buildings were evacuated as part of the Oslo peace process. In this period of uncertainty, it was visited by thousands. People that had been arrested or tortured had the opportunity to share with friends and relatives the very site of psychological trauma. The architecture of the site had become a tool for narration. Nothing was really planned. Instead, these spontaneous visits transformed ex-prisoners into the guides of a non-museum of horror. However, this period did not last for long. After a while the Palestinian Authority took over and transformed the site into a presidential compound and a prison. Ironically, it was here that Yassir Arafat was held prisoner in a single room during the last months of his life, as if the old function of a prison could not be exorcized.
The millennium started with the failed “peace negotiations,” with the Second Intifada, with targeted assassinations, arrests, barriers, a growing sense of strangulation. These repressive acts were made more heinous by the cruel convictions of the post-9/11 period. This was the background of our ongoing discussions. Our previous work had been engaged in spatial research and theory with the conflict over Palestine as our main site of investigation. Over the years, the three of us began talking about shifting the mode of our engagement, combining research and practice, i.e., about ways of using practice to provoke politics to reveal itself and act upon it. Instead of critical distance we sought critical proximity. Our wish was to inhabit the subject of our study, to enter, so to speak, into our respective books as characters,

to become part of the constellation of forces that shapes our environment.

Although our form of research and practice is collective, relational, and active, it would be wrong to think of it as “activist.” We do not work in an ameliorative manner; we have never proposed the kind of informal architecture we see worldwide promoted as a solution to alleviate poverty; we do not use photography to reveal injustice or protest it. Rather we have sought to establish a different balance between withdrawal and engagement, action in the world and research, fiction and proposal. Our work should neither be interpreted as an attempt to articulate an architectural utopia nor as a political instrument for “denouncing” or “mobilizing public opinion.” Our practice is not reactive to dominant forms of power; instead, it has a different temporality.

In a place like Palestine the risk is in becoming dependent on the frenetic rush of mainstream reporting.

We envision our practice instead as an attempt to produce a space from which it is possible to operate in the here and now but with radical long-term transformative visions. Architectural proposals are a form of fiction. Their effects could be the opening of the imagination. We want to find a place for architecture to act in the world and not in the service of a pre-existing agenda. Our architecture has materialized in both built and political space, and in the cultural collective imagination of actors—in meetings and presentations, in legal challenges, in negotiations...
We established our practice as a combination of an architectural studio and a residency program. DAAR, or Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency, aims to use spatial practice as a form of political intervention. There are not many precedents for the idea of an architectural residency, but there were many young practitioners from the region and many internationals that were eager to take part.

DAAR's program has gathered together architects, artists, activists, urbanists, filmmakers, and curators—all of whom wanted to work collectively on the subjects of politics and architecture. The residency has various modes of operation: it combines discursive and spatial intervention, collective learning, public meetings, and legal challenges.

The work of the studio/residency was further based on a network of local affiliations and the historical archives we have gathered in the years of our research. It was the necessity and the specificity of the situation that led us to assume that a viable approach is to be found not in the professional language of architecture and planning, but in inaugurating a collaborative "arena of speculation" that incorporates varied cultural and political perspectives.

The residency was established with the aim of engaging with a complex set of architectural problems centered on one of the most difficult dilemmas of political practice: how to act both propositionally and critically in an environment in which the political force fields, as complex as they may be, are so dramatically skewed. Are interventions at all possible? How could spatial practice within the here and now of the conflict over Palestine negotiate the existence of institutions and of their legal and spatial realities? How can we find an "autonomy of practice" that is both critical and transformative?
To engage in architecture in a zone of occupations and oppression is to engage in a less-than-ideal world. This has not only to do with the violence that contaminates every aspect of our life, but with determining the point in time from which speculation could begin. Conflicts create a sense of postponement. Architecture tends to await the post-conflict stage, or to imagine it, at least. But ours is an endless struggle, and, still, people and groups have different perceptions of what the desired post-conflict state might be—a desired state of affairs or a desired State? Political ideologies are not defined by present practices but by the kind of end state desired. Are you a one-, two-, or three-state solutionist? A partitionist? A federalist? The one/two/three-state or Middle Eastern confederation solutions are equally entrapped in their respective “top-down” expert perspectives, each with its own self-referential logic, system of government, and mediation. The only state we know is a state of conflict and struggle.

Thinking politics through architecture helps us enter the problem from another direction. Our architecture is not about determining a utopia of ultimate satisfaction, but simply starting from what exists—the present state of affairs and its material manifestation, from the rubble “unceasingly piled before our feet.” Our way of work seeks to find and utilize cracks and loopholes within existing colonial systems of separation and control. As such, it deals with the stuff of what might be called “real existing colonialism” and the trash it leaves behind. These include built structures, infrastructure, land ownership, and legal systems alike. Each of these elements enforces separations of a different nature and by different means.
We seek to reuse and profane rather than reject the material conditions of real existing colonialism. We seek to decolonize a system rather than establish a State. Our project mobilizes architecture and individual buildings in our vicinity as optical devices and as tactical tools within the unfolding struggle for Palestine.

At the time of writing these lines, the world is a very different place than it was in 2007 when we established our studio. It was the end of the Second Intifada—although we didn’t know it yet. Today, it seems as if the third is about to start. By the end of 2010, a series of revolts had begun to reshape our larger region. Many believed that the influence of the revolutionary events in the Arab world never made it to Palestine, while others insisted that the revolution started here. Indeed, some demonstrators in North Africa understood their actions quite literally as “Intifada.” But these revolts against military-presidents-for-life—some more hopeful than others—were not confined to the political process and they exercised a hypnotizing power on viewers and participants alike. Events in Cairo, Manama, Tunis, Istanbul, and Tehran have transformed the meaning of the term decolonization.

While previous revolutions might have been understood as decolonization, they did not succeed in liberating the people from cultural and military hegemony. Decolonization today is about taking public squares—which, notably, have mostly been traffic roundabouts. In effect, these roundabouts have been turned into a form of symbolic public ground. But in Arab cities, the term “public” is associated with the state and its repressive mechanisms; that is to say, the “public” was never owned by the people. It was these places throughout the region that became the vortex of new common forums of political action. It was only when protesters in Tahrir
began cleaning up the square that they finally took real communal use of it—and of the future of Egypt—as uncertain, contradictory, and full of dangers as that may be. In the wake of these events it seemed as if roundabouts everywhere were about to erupt.

In this book we have avoided thinking about acts of revolt and concentrated on what we called “the morning after.” Here you will not find any descriptions of popular uprising, armed resistance, or political negotiations though these are, of course, integral and necessary parts of any radical political transformation. Instead, we present you with a series of projects that try to imagine a longer future. Indeed, could it be that the lack of future speculation contributed to the fact that other forces often “hijacked” these revolutions?

The work presented in this book is thus an invitation to undertake an urgent architectural and political thought experiment: let’s think about the contemporary conditions of the world from the perspective of Palestine; let’s think of today’s struggles, not from the point of view of revolution, but from that of a continued struggle for decolonization.

In our projects we use buildings as optics from which to investigate and probe the political, legal, and social force fields, here and there, near and far—the military base in front of our studio, the refugee camps at the edge of our town, the idyllic village of Battir, the Parliament in Jerusalem that straddles the line of Israeli control, the ruins on the beach of Jaffa, the destroyed villages of the Nakba and the colonies of the West Bank.
This book has neither a single author nor a unified narrative; it is made of architectural investigations on different scales, locations, with different intensities and speeds. By extracting a selection of our projects, it attempts to elaborate on several key concepts informing the overall program of DAAR. The projects in this book should be understood as a set of architectural fables—speculating about the seemingly impossible, the actual transformation of the structures of domination. It is thus also, and fundamentally so, an invitation to rethink the problem of political subjectivity not from the point of view of a Western conception of a liberal citizen but rather from the point of view of the displaced and extraterritorial refugee.