

Binary Opposites What do you know about Palestine?

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Abstract

A new generation of well-educated Palestinian architects and artists have dominated the scenery since the late 1990s, and have translated their exposure to Western ideologies to multi-layered complex concepts and ideas. This newly-born intellectualism transcended the fragmented spatial geography of Palestine, where emphasis was placed upon individual experimentalism rather than national collectivism. Hence, the Palestinian identity was seeking the local aspect within the global context. This paper attempts to draw analysis across three layers: the physical layer, i.e. geographical fragmentation of Palestine, the social layer, i.e. duality of cultures that has caused conflict among Palestinian artists, and the political layer, i.e. that is represented in the intervention of power and dominance of Israel. Moreover, the research adopts the theoretical crossover between Foucault's notion of law and violence and Scott's theory of spatial struggle. Finally, the paper takes a closer look at the A.M. Qattan Foundation cultural hub which was a symbolic feature of the socio-spatial fragmentation of Palestine, as well as combining the local vernacular and contemporary architecture and spatial features within the building.

Keywords: Palestinian Art, Ramallah, Qattan Foundation Cultural Centre, Apartheid Wall

It is clear that the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall.

—James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

Introduction: What will the younger generation say?

An anthropological observation conducted by Monica Brady, school instructor of History, Humanities, and English, on young students of Ramallah, voiced the fragmented social environment of the Palestinian community. Maha, one of Brady's students, indicates the opposing forces that led to her upbringing (Brady 2015). Being a subject of a global political debate, that is Palestine, Brady's argument suggests that Maha is "constructed, not just by hostile western media, but by sympathetic supporters as well" (Brady 2015, 366). She resists being portrayed as either the terrorist as how the media wants her to be, or the freedom fighter as how the surrounding community wishes for. To discover the level of knowledge and awareness of foreign cultures of Palestine, a Skype conversation was held between the students of Ramallah and students of East London School. In an attempt to introduce the cinematic aspect in the process, as a strong visual tool that establishes suggestive images of reality, Maha emphasized the acclaimed film, *Omar* (2013) as being an



Figure 1. A general view shows the Palestinian houses in the village of Wadi Fukin as Israeli settlements are built in the background. Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019.

accurate representation of the Palestinian complex imagery. In the movie, the protagonist freedom fighter Omar, played by Palestinian actor Adam Bakri, is morally tormented when he agrees to work as an informant after being tricked into an admission of guilt by association. The main characters of the current whole picture are Omar and Maha. The fractured feature is dominant and evident. The film's strongest and most critical spatial elements, the Apartheid Wall, is frequently shown, being climbed by Omar to visit his lover Nadia. The wall establishes itself as a direct affront to freedom of movement by cutting Palestinians from entering Jerusalem (Slater 2017).

Quasi-Artistic, or Quasi-Occupational: The Physical Transformation & the Canvas

Architecture and the built environment is considered a process of slow violence. The Israeli occupation of Palestine, represented architecturally through the intervention of newly-built settlements through the Palestinian fabric, created an environment conceived to be unlivable for the Palestinians. According to Edelman (1995), physical structures are not just mere visible ideas of a specific social role, but a reflection of deep conceptual roots that serve to "simplify and intensify beliefs and perceptions that already exist" (Edelman, 1995:86). Such roots date back to 1967, ever since Israel

initiated a double implementation process of 'Judaization' – promotion of Jewish urban and demographic expansion – and 'de-Arabization' – extreme containment of Arab urban growth (Yiftachel, 2006). More than 121 Israeli settlements have been established since then in the West Bank, in addition to the facilitation of settler enclaves within the heart of Jerusalem (Thawaba & Al-Rimmawi, 2012). Following the 1967 occupation, the Israeli's architectural principle of maintaining separation and exercising control dominated the scenery. In the 2014 short documentary *Rebel Architecture: The Architecture of Violence*, architect and activist Eyal Weizman takes us on a tour to Gilo neighborhood where Israeli settlements provided the residents a sense of living within the center of Jerusalem despite being miles away. On a micro level, the buildings' structure reveals a rigid concrete framework rather than traditional stone which, when looking at the corner of the building, is merely a veneer. This approach is a vivid symbol of how the government exercises authority and dominance of the architectural and urban identity paving way for physical separation (Figure 1).

The Apartheid Wall proved its socio-duality effect onto local Palestinian artists by contrasting dull concrete slabs with colorful bricks. The conflicted imagery of the artwork on

the wall, i.e. resistance and unity versus biblical and peaceful landscape, though created conflicted perceptions to tourism, it has not confused the evidence of spatial geography (Figure 2). Klein (2005) maintains that the wall, being the most relevant representation of the city's transformation since 1967, is a dominant establishment of a 'Greater Jewish Jerusalem'. According to the findings of Chiodelli (2013), the newly established state encompasses 32.1% Arabs and 67.9% Jews. It's not a surprise to find that such division goes back to 1978, when Israeli authorities started working on a 2020 masterplan for Jerusalem, mainly aiming to maintain the 70-30 demographic balance for Israeli and Palestinians respectively (Thawaba & Al-Rimmawi, 2012). This takes us to the theory of Scott (1990) who highlights the grey zone "of the constant struggle between dominant and subordinate – not a solid wall" (Scott, 1990: 14). Here, the dominant body's sovereign power has an important spatial dimension (Foucault, 1977). As a crossover between Scott's theory of spatial struggle and Foucault's exercise of law and violence, "the Israeli military occupation exercises its sovereign power over Palestinian subjects in part by organizing Palestinian space" (Zawawi, Corijn & Van Heur, 2013:746). Space, hence, becomes a reservoir of physicality, historical narratives, and social perceptions; all serve to separate entities from one another. Such spatial multi-functionalities – on both the literal and symbolic levels – provides conspicuous justification of the Apartheid Wall and of the Palestinian-Israeli struggle over the definition and possession of space (Oshinski, 2018).

Social fragmentation came in a different form as well during the final negotiations that led to the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1995. This agreement 'colonial' system has divided the West Bank into three zones, mostly under Israeli military and civil control. As an artistic representation of the complex peace process, a Palestinian and an Israeli theatre directors decided to recreate Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with a Palestinian actor and a Jewish actress playing the leading roles. Ironically, *Romeo*, the Palestinian, and *Juliet*, the Jewish, (Rampell, 2016) were not able to sustain their unity beyond East Jerusalem. Instead, the increased borders along the West Bank have limited civic movement and cornered individuals to small local gathering spaces where modified forms of collective action have



Figure 2. 'Art Attack', one of Banksy's nine artworks on the Apartheid Wall. Scene Arabia, 2019.

generated – an altered spatial identity was born within areas "where national-oriented organizing was strong" (Baylouny, 2009:40). The concept of individuality emerged among the nation's spatial composure. There was a stark shift from tradition to the globalized modern, which was represented in the works of the new generation of architects. Their tendencies to offer something new to the Palestinian landscape was a direct response to the image that encircled them with civil engineers and master builders together (Abuarkub, & Al-Zwainy, 2018). Moreover, individuality is also induced within architecture schools in Palestine, where students are more influenced by foreign ideologies that are quite isolated from the local Palestinian culture. Architecture experiences a series of intellectual and practical conflicts within some areas of the West Bank (Abuarkub, & Al-Zwainy, 2018). For example, architects working in Ramallah, unlike surrounding regions, are mostly US graduates, which directly affects the imagery of the architectural aesthetic values.

On a parallel note, artists experienced their share of such transformation. During the first Intifada, images of the 'motherland' were the predominant scenery amongst the works of the "New Visions" group of Palestinian painters,



Figure 3. A.M. Qattan Foundation Cultural Center in Ramallah. Mille, 2018.



Figure 4. The A.M. Qattan Foundation Cultural Center, set up on a mountain, is a combination of both traditional and contemporary architecture. The Art Newspaper, 2018.

e.g. Sliman Mansour and Nabil Anani (Slitine, 2016). Mansour's 1989 artwork, *Olive-picking Triptych*, heavily symbolized the ancient connection of the Palestinians to their homeland. Mansour's work, among the other artists of the group, gave rise to the then newly formed ideology of Sumud – "a firm rootedness in the land, regardless of the hardships and humiliation caused by the occupation" (Ankori, 2006:74). The Oslo agreement marked a dramatic transformation in the artistic expression. It has induced a new life to the fabric of Ramallah, which has then become the political, economic, and cultural capital. Palestinian art "shifted from collective symbolic, illustrative, figurative and narrative expression to more individual or personal expression" (Sabella, 2009:90). The Palestinian art world echoes the geopolitical fragmentation occurring in the territories, eventually putting virtual barriers among the network of artists, i.e. online social links are mostly established (Slitine, 2016).

Contemporary Language and, or around, Local Vernacular: A Look at the A.M. Qattan Foundation Cultural Centre in Ramallah

A new generation of well-educated Palestinian architects and artists have dominated the scenery in the last 20 years, and have translated their exposure to Western ideologies to multi-layered complex concepts and ideas. This newly-born intellectualism transcended the fragmented spatial geography of Palestine, where the emphasis was placed upon individual experimental rather than national collectivism. Hence, the Palestinian identity was seeking the local aspect within the global context. The theory surrounding such phenomenon is the "significant change in the sphere of traditional forms of consciousness" (Swadzba, 2011:332). The socio-spatial reaction of local cultures to the impact of globalization is formed in five different scenarios according to Krzysztofek (2002, as cited in Swadzba, 2011). The first is full acceptance, the second is total rejection, the third is selective adaptation, i.e. partial acceptance and partial rejection, the fourth is hybridization, i.e. co-adaptation of cultures, and the final scenario, which is the main focus in this study, is cultural duality, i.e. participation in national and ethnic cultures while remaining within the global culture.

Since 2000, i.e. the beginning of the second intifada, the city of Ramallah has become more

socially heterogeneous than it was during the 1995 Oslo agreement. Despite its relatively small size, Ramallah is acquiring most of the attributes of contemporary metropolises in the region, including a visible globalized lifestyle and new sensibilities whose most enthusiastic carrier is the aspiring new middle class (Taraki, 2008). These characteristics, ironically, co-exist with the bleak surrounding environment of death and destruction; a war-ravaged city that nevertheless "knows how to live". With the continuous interests from Western and Israeli journalists who have been the most enthusiastic promoters of the new Ramallah, focusing on its cafes, restaurants, theatres and cultural venues, Ramallah is depicted as proof of the resilience of the middle class, the victory of globalization the defeat of resistance and the ability to assure normalcy in a time of conflict. Since 2008, Ramallah has experienced a construction boom that was kicked off under the tenure of former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad who oversaw a massive state-building efforts, supported by international donors (Hatuqa, 2018). According to a survey conducted by local architects, there were 832 historical buildings in Ramallah 25 years ago. Today fewer than half are still standing.

On 28th June 2018, a £16m beacon of cultures, the A.M. Qattan Foundation cultural hub (Figure 3), was opened to the public in Ramallah, to provide an oasis of calmness to the citizens (Wainwright, 2018). According to the proposal winners, Donaire Arquitectos, the building brings enlightenment to the Palestinian people. The building is a landmark set up on the mountain, seen from everywhere (Figure 4). Despite its modernist and contemporary form, it is built from the "Palestinian very earth and stone" (Furuto, 2012). Furthermore, it incorporates both the traditional and contemporary aspects of architecture into its physical setup, reflected in the use of stone plinth carved in terraces out of the natural soil, enhancing the interior-exterior relation through the use of lattices and natural stone permeable screenings. Palestinian philanthropist Abdel-Mohsin Al-Qattan, founder of the foundation, emphasized the unique level of complexity that this building has reached, stating that the local construction industry has not reached such in-depth details yet. Part of this complexity was induced within *Subcontracted Nations*, the inaugural exhibition at the center. According to curator Yazid Anani, the exhibition addresses

the newly-born globalized state-society relationship that is manifested in the intervention of the private sector into public services, and the diminishing role of the state (AM Qattan Foundation, 2018). Questioning the possibility of returning to the origins, one of the artists, showcased a short experimental video that shows a close-up of the artist's hands attempting to place the seeds back into a pomegranate shell. The Qattan center, in a way, aims to address such issues through its textural monumentality. The predominant material used is limestone, yet, as a collective effort of the traditional and the contemporary, colored ceramic tiles forming 'frozen' carpets are being inserted at the reception, the café, and the library (Furuto, 2012). The Qattan center, just like the students of Ramallah at Monica Brady's school, symbolizes the duality of spatial culture, the traditional and the modern, which is in a continuous struggle. Eventually, the first generation of Palestinian architects brought more awareness and a tendency towards regionalist architecture, which arises from the crucial factor of identity (Abuarkub & Al-Zwainy, 2018).

Conclusion

Documenting the historical overview of the Palestinian physical and non-physical timeline is a crucial yet complicated thing to do. The repercussions of the 1967 war presented a nation with a unique character of spatial resistance to consumption development. There was a need for a different set of architectural prototypes, which included new residential settlements, new urban plans, and new infrastructure, all serving the Israeli occupation. New apartheid roads and walls not only have caused physical separation, but also defined a critical milestone in the Palestinian architectural identity. Post-modern and globalized features of Palestine are induced with a crossroads of different cultures that gave the illusion of tradition. Reinforced with the roots of their grandparents, the new generation of Palestinian architects and artists continuously attempt to revive their origins into their contemporary work as a symbol of rebellion against oppressive power and subordination.

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