PUBLIC ART AND SPATIAL CONTROL IN PALESTINE

/ Ariel Bardi /
In February of 2013, a group of Palestinian activists set up camp in the E1 Israeli settlement bloc, creating a Palestinian settlement that they called Bab al’Shams. Reminiscent of New York’s Zuccotti Park, or Tel Aviv’s own tent city, the village soon boasted a library, media center, health clinic, and communal council. While its residents were evicted within several days, the new municipality – part protest, part mass art installation – left behind a host of unanswered questions.
Who has the right to assert spatial control – not in terms of laws and legality, but in terms of building vocabularies? The ‘look’ of a place helps to confer a certain heritage and history, a narrative of ownership and exclusivity. As Edward Said once reminded us, “The struggle over geography... is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”

Statehood is mediated through space. The image itself colonizes, taming unruly lands. It rebrands whole areas and maps new topographies of power. In Israel, the ‘Zionist spirit,’ writes Israeli architect Zvi Efrat, is ‘printed on the landscape over and over again with every new spatial move or architectural object.’

Indeed, the story of Israeli spatial control is not only a story of annexation, but of illustration – so, too, is the narrative of Palestinian resistance.

What does it mean to ‘occupy’ space? What about ‘occupying’ occupied space? On the wall of a popular Ramallah cafe, someone has printed, ‘Occupy Wall Street, not Palestine.’ The verb form has pioneered a new battle cry. Writes Ariella Azoulay, ‘Now, when the whole world chooses the verb occupy to designate the reclamation of civil rights in public space.’

Can public art occupy the occupation?

In Palestine, such visual occupations serve both as agents and agitators of an ongoing conflict. On the so-called ‘Security Barrier,’ muralists such as Banksy have festooned the concrete wall with graphic one-liners: a small girl frisking an armed guard, a stretch of watery idyll between stage curtains, a bouquet of flowers lobbed as ammunition. The wall stands as a degraded icon, its authority undermined by the barrier’s subversive decorations, renegade re-appropriations of the spaces that it both divides and rules. It speaks to the ways in which places are disputed and disrupted not only through political boundaries, but through images, and the imaginings that they evoke.

It is no wonder, then, that the wall has also sparked the imagination of artists like Wafa Hourani, whose works re-imagine the wall in dizzying, supersonic excess: mirrored, silver-plated, supported by tanks of goldfish; nearby Qalandia is positioned as a metropolis in miniature. Here, the power of space is harnessed as its own representational medium, with the ability to conjure new hegemonic urban forms.

Other utopian projects have spilled out onto city streets, their spatial narratives going willfully off-script. In interfaith Haifa, where public art has traced a path of coexistence,
the Palestinian neighborhood of Wadi Nisnas quietly memorializes the forgotten histories of former tenants. ‘Someone lived here until 1947,’ reads the Hebrew plaque above a stone archway, designed by artist Haya Touma. As a public artifact, it is not a vestige, but a living ghost, dragging its chains and crying out for recognition. It argues something that we should already well know: that the Palestinian past is not past us.