

Decolonizing architecture, or, “how to inhabit your enemy’s house?”

by Lorenzo Pezzani

“The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. [...] Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical lay-out, will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized.”

F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*



decolonizing.ps, *Return to Nature, the transformation of the military base of Oush Grab (The Crows Nest)*, screenprint on paper. 60 x 95cm, Published as an edition of 30 prints by Edinburgh Printmakers, 2010

To some, decolonization could sound like a rather outdated term which evokes unfilled dreams of liberation and equality rather than an operative concept on which to base a contemporary laboratory of spatial practice and critical theory. If this term is used in the context of the conflict over Palestine, then it might appear to others as a “dangerous” word, too politically incorrect and discredited not to raise doubts about an initiative undertaken under its label. But the work of Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman, a group of architects who founded in 2007 the architectural studio and residency Decolonizing Architecture in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem, takes precisely, and

somewhat courageously, this term as its starting point and tries to reclaim its transformative power.

Their use of the term mobilizes the concept of decolonization to challenge the so-called “peace industry” and the rhetoric of “solutions” to the Palestinian conflict. In a context where the possibilities of intervention seem foreclosed by a largely stalemated political debate, and where every form of critical agency risks being complicit with the apparatus of domination it seeks to dismantle, Decolonizing Architecture represents not only a change of terminology but also a paradigm shift. Their work could



decolonizing.ps Migrations, *the transformation of the military base of Oush Grab (The Crow's Nest)*, screenprint on paper. 60 x 95cm, Published as an edition of 30 prints by Edinburgh Printmakers, 2010

be seen as an attempt to answer a simple but crucial question: how is it possible “to find an autonomy of practice that is both critical and transformative”? As DA members recently wrote, “after a few years of spatial research and theory with Palestine as the main case study, in 2007 we have decided to shift the mode of our engagement [...]. Our aim was to extend the analytical reach of our investigation and to engage with the spatial realities of the conflict in a propositional manner”. They thus started to develop, in collaboration with a large local and international network of spatial practitioners, a series of projects that engage critically, but also propositionally, with the Israeli architecture of occupation and separation and try to confront it, (re-)use it and subvert it. They use the tools and language of architecture to elaborate concrete proposals that engage with social and political

realities and thus stretch the boundaries of what we understand as architecture.

The occasion to start thinking about such alternative scenarios was given by the proposal of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, put forward during a conference in December 2003, to unilaterally withdraw all the Israeli settlers and IDF personnel from the Gaza Strip. When, in the following months, the plan became more and more solid, the question about the fate of the houses, public buildings, synagogues and productive sites that would have been abandoned became more pressing. An international arena of speculation was opened up by this decision: a number of NGOs, governmental agencies, religious groups, foreign governments, policy think-tanks and private developers started imagining what would happen to the 3000

buildings evacuated. Moreover, the various political parties inside Israel and Palestine expressed different, and often contrasting, opinions. The question, in fact, was not merely strategic or economical, but had become a hotly debated issue perhaps mostly because of its complex symbolic meaning. The images of what could have happened to these structures once abandoned by the Israelis acquired a distinct political value. The Israeli government feared the potentially disruptive effect on the public opinion of images of Palestinians re-appropriating the characteristic architectures of the settlements. Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conjured apocalyptic images of Arabs living in the homes of Jews, thus reversing somehow the epic images of Zionist conquest. For Palestinians, for whom those buildings had been, until then, a heinous instrument of occupation, the reoccupation was no less problematic. For example, the Palestinian Ministry of Planning proposed the destruction and re-ruralisation of most areas.

In August 2005 however, as the Israeli government finally decided to destroy all buildings and public infrastructures that were evacuated (except synagogues), the debate was cut short and all of the plans of reuse were crushed in huge stacks of rubble. But, for the first time, the possibility of imagining a different future for the Israeli settlements emerged. It was in the aftermath of this event that Decolonizing Architecture was born. Its fundamental move was to shift its focus from the historical event of the disengagement plan to a larger area of intervention. After the failure of plans of reuse in the case of Gaza, where there was (and there is still) no foreseeable sign of an Israeli decision to abandon settlements or military bases in the West Bank, DA started imagining possible alternative futures precisely in this area. Later, proposals have gradually extended to include, for instance, the villages abandoned by Palestinians in 1948 during the Nakba and other forms of colonial division of space. What could happen to the colonial infrastructure



The Book of Returns. Decolonizing Architecture with Ahmad Barclay, Merlin Eayrs, Marcella Rafaniello, Maria Rocco, Mahdi Sabbagh, Bert Ruelens, Nina Valerie Kolowratnik, Tashy Endres
CAPTATION- The Al Feneiq Cultural Centre: two specular projects, one on the ruins of the former Palestinian village, below in the Deheishe refugee camp.



decolonizing.ps, De-parcelling, 3D model,
2008, high density foam, 3D print , 70cm x
165cm x 15cm Photo© Barbara Modolo

once unplugged from the political power that created and sustained it? The issue has not been to organize a planned, top-down reuse of the settlements, or to neutralize the destructive impulse that is associated with decolonization. As Fanon wrote, “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon”, and if occupation has been enforced through architecture, then, in the moment of decolonization, architecture must burn. Eliminating those architectures, nevertheless, could not be the solution to the problem, but, as it happened in Gaza, could rather bring enormous logistical, ecological and political problems. The “disengagement plan” left behind tons of toxic rubble that irremediably damaged Gaza aquifers. Therefore; what DA has been trying to do is to offer a lexicon of spatial interventions, a laboratory to think through and experiment with various ways in which people, after an instinctive moment of re-appropriation and destruction, could start dealing with those affected sites.

In the past three years, many artists, architects, students, sociologists, anthropologists, filmmakers and NGO workers from different areas of Palestine, as well as from the rest of the world, have contributed to the realization of images, architectural plans and models, short films, atlases and manuals. During residencies and summer schools, people have come and worked together on various specific case studies that illustrate the specificities of the Palestinian conflict, but which, at the same time, underline its paradigmatic character at a global level. The outcomes of these collective efforts have been presented in various exhibitions and lectures around the word: at Bozar, Brussels in winter 200809-; at the International Architectural Biennial in Rotterdam from September 2009 to January 2010; and at Edinburgh Art Festival during the summer of 2010. Among the first proposals elaborated by DA was a series of tactical operations aiming at dismantling the internal organisational structure of the Psagot



Decolonizing Architecture Panel Discussion at Tate Modern, 25 May 2010, including Eyal Weizman, Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, Rasha Salti, Abdoumalik Simone and Lorenzo Pezzani.

settlement in the Ramallah/Al Bireh area. These strategies were conceived not as prescriptions but rather as a series of gradual processes that could foster the deactivation of the settlement's logic of separation and the emergence of new forms-of-life in common. One of the strategies suggested, "un-grounding", which envisaged the acceleration of the decay of the existing road and ground surfaces in the settlement. The progressive erosion and removal of the first 10 centimetres of ground, where the signs and barriers (roads, sidewalks, private garden, fences, etc.) that organised the movements of people and vehicles were located, constituted the first-step in creating a new, unified surface

that would annul the division among individual buildings and between the settlement and its surroundings. Another category, dubbed "unhoming", imagined ways to turn the suburban, single-family housing into collective spaces, thus testing the limits of transformability of individual homes into public buildings (Unhoming, 2008, digital print on paper); "de-parcelling", instead, found in a land-ownership map of 1954 the scheme upon which to imagine a new zoning of private and public areas (De-parcelling model, 2008, high density foam). Each of these strategies has been presented through models, drawings, archival material and interviews, but also through video-lectures and

videos realized by photographer and film-maker Armin Linke, and a manual with diagrams conceived by the architectural and graphic design collective Salottobuono (Manual of Decolonization, 2008).

In the case of the military base in Oush Grab, on the outskirts of Bethlehem, evacuated by the Israeli army in 2006, DA's projects have also become tools in the daily struggle against Israeli "land-grab". After having been evacuated, Israeli settlers have regularly occupied the site in order to reclaim its "property" and try to establish a new settlement. However, these activities are in contrast with Palestinian and international activists, among which include members of DA, who have organised various activities inside the former base. The proposal developed by local residents, local NGOs and DA was to gradually return the base back to nature, not creating other buildings but instead adapting the debris of its inhabitation to function as a stopover for the thousands of migrant birds that take seasonal refuge in the area. The body of work entitled *The Crow's Nest* (2009) summarises this proposal and includes an architectural model, a series of drawings, timelines, diagrams and screen prints. In the striking images that illustrate this almost lyrical "detournement", storms of birds flock in to the abandoned base, suggesting, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben has noted, "forms-of-life yet to be devised".

DA has also produced recently, with the help of designer Diego Segatto, a series of books, each one dealing with a specific concept, issue or case study that has been tackled by DA's projects. These books, printed in a large format, have also been displayed in various exhibitions such as the Istanbul Biennale and Homeworks V in Beirut. One of them, called "Book of Returns",

has been produced by DA in collaboration with Alessandra Gola for Zochrot, an Israeli non-governmental art organization that seeks to raise awareness inside Israel about the Nakba. It presents the work that DA has done in trying to re-conceptualize the issue of the return of Palestinian refugees. With its huge dimensions, hard case and long strap, allowing it to be carried easily, it is thought of as a nomadic device around which stakeholders can gather and discuss. Through maps, testimonies, drawings, analysis and images about both the Palestinian town destroyed in 1948 and refugee camps, the work tries to free debate around the right of return from the "suspended politics of political theology", which tends to confine the process to an unattainable future and rather maps out and intervenes within a series of present practices of return.

Currently, thanks to the generous support of the London-based Delfina Foundation, DA has been able to initiate some new projects which include a yearly two-month residency for a UK-based artist and architect. As the first resident under this new initiative, I was involved in the elaboration of a new research project focusing on the relationship between space and law in "Area C", the part of the West Bank under administrative and military Israeli control.

All of these projects combine and mobilize different agendas, modes of production and strategies. They operate somewhere in-between a theoretical space of reflection, which builds up visions and refuses short-sighted solutions, and a hands-on practice that is engaged with social and political realities. Intervening in a shifting network of various academic, non-governmental and community-based organisations, DA takes up multiple roles such as that of an NGO

without international donors' agendas and institutional deadlines, an engaged academic research centre, and an architectural practice that doesn't (only) design buildings. Sometimes activists, sometimes pedagogues, architects, artists and theoreticians, DA members change roles and contribute collectively to this ongoing project.

Seen through their projects, the decolonisation of space is a complex collective operation that may concern any apparatus of domination. It should not be understood simply as reuse, i.e. as an attempt to fit new functions into an empty shell, but rather as a constant process that could enable the discovery of a common use for what was an apparatus of separation and domination. In fact, postcolonial governments have often recycled representative buildings, palaces and villas built by colonial regimes. In many cases, however, the same architecture has continued to reproduce colonial power relations in space. And, as it has been showed in the case of Gaza in 2005, this risk is still present. When, unaware of the decision to destroy all the buildings evacuated, an Arab developer from the Gulf offered to buy one of the settlements and turn it into an exclusive, almost extraterritorial tourist resort, it became clear that the control devices of the settlements could have functioned to realize new enclaves (as has already happened with Sharm el-Sheikh, the former Israeli military base recently transformed into a "paradise" of global tourism). On the other hand, the same buildings could have been re-appropriated by the Palestinian elite and turned into an exclusive "gated community", thus reinstating the logic of separation that organized its original form.

When a few years ago DA started an extended dialogue with various Palestinian associations

around these issues, the first reaction to their proposals was a smile. It was a smile of disbelief and disillusionment, the bitter irony of a people who have been fighting for their freedom for the past 60 years. But also, and most importantly, it represented the opening up of a moment of agency which raised consciousness of the possibility to plan one's future. As Alessandro Petti told me, "when we started working with a Palestinian local administration on the project of reuse of a settlement that was located inside its administrative boundaries (even if it was, of course, under the administration of Israeli authorities), we found out that the area of the settlement was not even represented on Palestinian maps". The settlement was a blank spot in the Palestinian consciousness, a sort of repressed collective unconscious whose dangerous surveillance apparatus was not spoken about but, at the same time, was completely internalized to the point of becoming normal. As curator Rasha Salti noted during an event at the Tate Modern on Decolonizing Architecture, organised by Delfina Foundation, DA's projects dared to imagine the unimaginable. Importantly, daring to imagine the unimaginable is not only the first step in the decolonization of the mind, it is also a fundamentally political act. It expands the limits of what is thinkable and mobilizes the possibilities that are not-yet offered. It is in this extraordinary imaginative leap, in this opening up of a deadlocked debate, that I believe lies the greatest value of the Decolonizing Architecture project.

*Lorenzo Pezzani was the first Delfina Foundation resident at the Decolonizing Architecture studio in Bethlehem. He is a researcher based in London. After having studied architecture at the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio in Switzerland, he engaged, in 2008, in the activities of the Centre for Research Architecture (Goldsmiths) where he obtained an MA and where he is currently a PhD candidate. His practice-based research projects, moving across diverse disciplines and media, have taken various forms (video and audio pieces, installations, publications) and have been exhibited, among other places, at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow and at the 4th International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam. Lorenzo Pezzani has worked as assistant curator for Manifesta 7 and has contributed to various journals and magazines. His current work looks at how the afterlife of various «things» (buildings, monuments, migrant bodies and images) could enhance, through profanation, the production of a new postcolonial ecology. He is also contributing to the ongoing project *<Model court>*, which analyses the courtroom as an apparatus that produces legal “truths” by means of various protocols of spacial and aural performativity.*



decolonizing.ps, Oush Grab model (detail), 2008, High density foam, digital print on paper, dimensions 70 x 83 x 66 cm Photo © Barbara Modolo

We would like to thank Decolonizing Architecture and The Delfina Foundation for their generous support (in particular, Delfina Entrecanales, Aaron Cezar, Eva Langret and Claudia Wolf). I would also like to thank Nicola Perugini for the conversations, friendship and hospitality.