

Political Space The Wall & Art

by Yahya Zaloom



Palestinians and left-wing Israelis demonstrate on the Palestinian side of the wall, in the neighbourhood of Abu Dis, east Jerusalem, 07 February 2004.

In this essay I am investigating the effect that the creation of a new space, the “Wall”, stretching over 300 miles through Israel and the West Bank, has had on art.

Looking at the map of the Middle East, it is a fact that the colonising powers of the last century divided the region into countries with little consideration for the natives’ cultures, relations and heritage. The main consideration in these divisions was the colonisers’ benefits - they held the power so they dictated the current border-line. Today, history repeats itself as the same process is happening in the West Bank: building a separation barrier unilaterally between the two peoples will create two spaces that will lead to two countries in the future.

The “Wall” is a combination of eight meter high concrete slabs, electronic fences and observation posts measuring between 35 and 100 meters in width. Construction started in

June 2002 and, when completed, it will cut Jerusalem off from Palestinian areas to the north

and south as a requirement to stop Palestinian suicide bombers from entering Israel.

Building the barrier has affected the two sides in different ways. It had created fewer attacks on Israel border cities hence perceived as a successful, much-awaited security measurement, yet it had led to the restriction of Palestinian workers' movement and, automatically, less income and more depressed standards of living.

The Palestinians call it "Wall", as it divides their communities and separates them from their land, while the other side call it "Fence", as its main purpose is to give them security, overall control, and freedom of movement. The two phrases carry clear public-relations connotations. "Fence" summons a homely image, a logical attempt at self-defense, while "Wall" conjures a prison. It is worth mentioning that as a moderate position, media refers to the West Bank structure as a "security barrier" because that is the best generic term to describe a structure that in some places resembles a high-tech chain-link fence and in others is a concrete wall.

In researching texts and images on the subject of the wall, I came across certain issues related to the interpretation of space. Below, I analyse these topics through text and image.

Building new spaces requires the involvement of experts that are needed to 'unfold' the space. According to Henri Lefebvre, these experts will transform the mathematical spaces in to natural place giving the building/structure the social face that attracts people to live within it. No architect was employed on the project of the "Wall", hence the "Wall" "looked clumsy and ugly", whereas it could have been an attractive structure, "potentially as beautiful as the Great

Wall of China." Thus, this impacts upon understanding the difference in art production of artists living under these conditions versus those living elsewhere.

In my opinion, the space created from establishing this wall is a perfect example of Lefebvre's "mental space".

The "Wall" has also become a place for collective activism. Part of this activism are the graffiti artists from around the world who leave their marks on the Palestinian side of the "Wall". The works form a kind of collective creativity, a network. The majority of works protest against the construction of a barrier that implements a



An aerial view shows Israel's security barrier in the West Bank town of Abu Dis on the edge of Jerusalem, 20 October 2005.

state of exception, a temporary suspension of legal rights. One of those artists is Banksy, who painted on the “Wall” in about ten different places. In some places, the “Wall” looks like a gigantic scribble board, or solely like a big concrete slab. The “Wall” is “the ultimate tourist site for a graffiti artist”, as Banksy put it. However, I rarely come across a major work on the “Wall” made by a Palestinian artist. This is because they don’t want to glorify the object of separation and the damage it causes; they don’t want to risk the “Wall” becoming institutionalized, meaning that it will be accepted as something that will stay forever.



An aerial view shows Israel's security barrier in the West Bank town of Abu Dis on the edge of Jerusalem, 20 October 2005.



Palestinian youths play football at Anata Boys School, next to the Israeli separation barrier, 09 May 2006.



A general view of the concrete wall separating the West Bank village of Abu Dis from east Jerusalem, 18 February 2004.