



“We Only Want to Live”: From Israeli Domination Towards Palestinian Decency in Shu’fat and Other Confined Jerusalem Neighborhoods

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Partition Wall around Shu’fat Camp.
Source: Noura Akkawi.

The Paradigm of Domination

In the last decade, critical studies have considered the question of space in the Palestinian territories, and in particular in East Jerusalem, mainly from a geopolitical point of view, deploying geography, political science and political philosophy to produce explanatory concepts, such as spaciocide, urbanicide, biopolitics and the civilian or civil occupation. In these analyses, the Palestinians endure the Israeli occupation, in Agamben’s words, as the “bare (naked) life” outside or unprotected by the law¹ and Palestinian cities and urban neighborhoods are configured as camps or ghettos.

We will not contest here the excess of military power or the illegal sovereignty of Israel over Palestinians. Assuredly, the Israeli system militarizes space from the recent construction of the so-called “security barrier” to the effacement of the Palestinian vernacular landscape. But in this brief essay I will focus on aspects of the production of

space that the categories of “external domination” do not usually address – whether the internal fractures and post-Oslo new “public” spaces of urban Ramallah or the individual and family initiatives of Shu’fat residents to create new livable spaces in the shadow of the Wall.

In order to examine other social aspects of the “urban” question in Palestine, I will briefly develop two cases from separate time periods. One is the process initiated with the Oslo Accords and the urban development in the Palestinian territories from 1995 to 2000. The second case is that of the Shu’fat refugee camp, currently surrounded by the Wall. In this latter case, I am particularly interested in the sense of privacy and intimacy and the concern for privacy, dignity and decency asserted on an individual level by Shu’fat’s residents, which also provides an opportunity to interrogate the place of individual liberalism.² In both cases, our approach assumes the existence within Palestinian communities of heterogeneity, diversity, and pluralism that an analysis which focuses solely on domination may not recognize.

I will briefly shed light on the urban fabric in Palestine during the period of the Oslo Accords (1995-2000) to show several urban social patterns created in that period that are not directly the effects of geopolitics or the “civilian occupation” but mainly effects of what I term the “cosmo-political” or the model of universal modernity, which includes economic regulations in an international commercial framework, the free flow of capital and goods, and a political system based on elections.³ I thus suggest that behind the geopolitically devised walls and the conflict of sovereignty, there is also the impact of global economies and a transmission of globalization which, combined with local identities, is expressed in new forms of urban production. We will, thus, assume that political regimes (such as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza) cannot suppress all urban and social development. There are deep resistances to, and discrepancies between, institutional and political structures, and the urban and social rhythms of a place.

Observing a limited time period in Palestine—reconstruction between 1995 and 2000—reveals the plurality of Palestinian space. The structure of social life during this ephemeral period of “peace” engendered inequalities that were different from those of occupation. The eruption of international stakes, and the opening to the world made possible by the “peace” process, changed the urban structure of Palestinian cities considerably.

Oslo, Globalization and Slow Frontiers: Pacification in Palestine and its Consequences (1995-2002)

The Oslo period (1995-2000) and the period prior to the construction of the Wall (until 2002) is the context for our analysis of the present. Careful observation of this period reveals the difficulties of differentiating between the urban effects of reconstruction (or “pacification”) and the urban effects of domination by war. The Palestinian occupied territory is not only disjointed and isolated by separation barriers,

it is also fragmented by “slow frontiers,” more or less visible, within urban Palestinian society—frontiers that reinforce the power of one over another, not territorially but socially.

A new class of economic and political entrepreneurs was born in the wake of post-Oslo national reconstruction, tied to an international system, who directed the culture of peace and economic liberalism and its concomitant economic effects: the building of infrastructure of all kinds, especially urban management; the exploitation of customs, border crossings, taxi services and transport in general; communications and related investments, and other licenses, as well as the accumulation of capital and access to symbolic resources. At the same time, a proliferation of NGOs, professional consultants, service providers (political experts, lawyers, engineers, etc.) appeared in the sectors of human rights, education, women’s rights, the environment and health.⁴ They participate in the management of the city, the construction of democratic and liberal spaces, mobilizing the notion of the “public good” in order to develop private enterprises in the spirit of a market economy, creating in turn, a new public sphere. At the same time 150,000 Palestinians returned from exile in Europe or the Gulf countries where they had settled.

The national liberation movement was effectively subsumed by a nascent capitalism. The dream of the nation was “realized” through investment, mostly in real estate. A city like Ramallah where the elite, the decision makers and the new national and regional administration was established, was shaped by universal or transnational influences, due the strong role of the Diaspora or the Palestinian upper class. Global culture, re-interpreted locally, took root in open urbanized spaces, for instance in “downtown” Ramallah, which became more accessible than Jerusalem, the economic, political, and cultural capital of the West Bank until the Oslo years, when most West Bank residents were barred from entry into the city.

During the “golden age of Oslo”, land prices soared. The real estate market experienced a considerable increase due to speculation and the monopoly of private investors. New fragmented neighborhoods were built on the periphery of cities and towns without concern for quality, spatial logic or organic relations to the existing city – and above all without any consideration of diversity, public space, or other social pre-occupations.⁵

The process of opening up to the world was but another form of fragmentation. Globalized or transnational forms of this fragile reconstruction, have served to further accentuate the invisible borders, the social and spatial distances between the various strata of a community unified by virtue of its destiny.

One result of the reconstruction appears here as an accentuation of the social segregation inside the Palestinian cities: refugees versus those from the Diaspora, poor versus rich, condominiums versus camps. We consider that a large number of Palestinians refugees like the Palestinians of Jerusalem, or ordinary inhabitants, also remain victims of colonialism as well as capitalism.

The urban euphoria of 1995-2000 brought to the fore the visible and invisible borders that traverse cities, making evident the durable ruptures of time. These new

urban spaces contradict the idea of the city, denying its popular or heterogeneous layers preventing it from achieving symbolic aspects of shared common space and the quest for sociability. This last point is especially important: the absence of the notion of public space and the common good, in the political sense of the meaning. Contrary to this idea – the new urban and public spaces (cafes, malls, etc) appear during this period to be linked to the sphere of media which has facilitated the separation of social spheres and the fragmentation of the social worlds without physical (human) relations.

In Palestine, public space is not the result of the actions of the state, but is a product of a cultural and economic sphere, largely independent of the (non-existent) state. This public sphere is associative, civic and transnational but does not attempt to address the political issues of a shared humanity and common good.

Towards Common Decency: “Enclosed Citizens” in Confined Neighborhoods

I will now turn to the current situation, that of separation. Can we enrich the critical theory of the ghetto often used to characterize the current situation of enclosure?

The everyday activities in the Palestinian Territories and East Jerusalem reveal that the stigma stamped on Palestinian subjects by Israeli external “law and order” is not reflected, as Agamben argues, in Palestinian subjects barred from any access to a positive sense of their selves and their lives. This does not mean, however, that the notion of the “everyday:” is an unproblematic category here. For instance, “enclosed people” especially in East Jerusalem and the Palestinian suburbs (Anata, Bir Nabala) have developed extraordinary means to make ends meet. The most ordinary actions (one’s daily job) may have the least unexpected consequences, such as imprisonment because of illegally having crossed the “border” between home and work. One may for example have to take the most dangerous measures (the risk of being jailed or injured) to earn a basic and decent living in order to provide for one’s family. An ethnographic or sociological survey of these everyday activities, however, moves beyond the strict vocabulary of survival and resistance.

The recent separation and isolation of the Palestinian citizens, (in Jerusalem for instance) has had some paradoxical effects: one of them is the strengthening of the sense of privacy, intimacy and property, and individual and family capabilities (following the capability concepts of Amartya Sen and Paul Ricoeur⁶) especially, in the case of the refugees, as in Shu’fat camp discussed below. A sense of human decency in the context and conditions of enclosure, not only refers to economic well being but to individual choice, where individuals and families work for well-being and capabilities that cannot be realized on the larger scale of the collective. Enclosed Palestinians, especially in the case of refugees, seem to distinguish between the order of representation, where collective duties and norms such as resistance, nationalism, and the right of return are placed, and the order of affect which includes privacy, individual choice and self realization.

The enclosed “citizen” (who is in fact without citizenship) uses her or his capacities to distinguish his or her intimate, individual and private world from “hostile” or “external” domination. Using the term ‘enclosed citizens’ assumes, not only the trapped fatalism of the “ghetto” situation, but even more, the *implementation* of ordinary or everyday practices and policies of life, that take advantage of the hope of resistance or patriotism and open new perspectives on individual liberalism and the theory of justice. Starting from several, examples in Shu’fat camp, I will briefly develop some ideas about everyday or ordinary practices that have emerged behind the Wall.

Through several surveys of the built environment I conducted in Shu’fat camp, I aim to understand how concrete and everyday practices in the camp, begin with private and familiar space and operate in relation to larger notions of political and common arenas. The context produced by a chaotic, violent history, the minutiae of the law, of domination, and the systematic bias in the enforcement of law, seem to define a very limited set of possibilities – conditions that seemingly allow Palestinian camp residents little more than survival and deterioration. But we also find capabilities among residents to formulate and enact projects for the future. Despite the relations of force imposed by the closure (the control of movement and of the mobility of people, the military presence, and the physical imprint of the Wall), enclosed citizens create their own modalities for addressing and regulating these injustices. As well as the collective and historical representations of Palestinian national aspirations, individual and familial dynamics also seem to shape the future, producing a larger range of actions to challenge humiliation and dispossession, including the expropriation of land involved in the construction of the Wall.

Investment in the Domestic

Residents of Shu’fat camp face a series of difficult questions as they pursue their daily life: how to improve their lives and construct livable spaces from which to act and communicate when war, restrictions and dispossession penetrate so deeply into their daily life? Shu’fat camp residents are Palestinian refugees, registered with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency) and thus receive social and educational services, as well as a food ration card. Paradoxically, they are also residents of Jerusalem and under certain conditions benefit from city residential status. But the erection of the “security barrier” in 2005 has profoundly modified the civic status of Jerusalem residents and the small camp of Shu’fat with a registered population of less than 11,000 persons. The camp is now girded by two sections of the Wall, which also divides East Jerusalem into two parts. Those who find themselves on the “good” side of the Wall have seen their rights of residence and mobility maintained and have kept their civic rights. In Shu’fat, as in other Jerusalem area communities, the construction of the Wall has torn apart families, ripped the familial and economic fabric, historically governed by exchanges and proximity to Jerusalem or the hinterland of Ramallah. Spatial position has determined individual fates, dictating

social vulnerability for some and “luck” for others who maintain their freedom of movement and their social advantages. For those behind the Wall, it is a story of political and civil invisibility where the refugees nonetheless act to build and produce their own spaces.

Palestinians in Shu’fat camp invest above all in the domestic, as well as common space, working for material comfort for their families. Their attachment to place, privacy and security is affirmed through these investments, which are not always taken into account in conventional discourses of resistance. Their attachment to domesticity (nearness) privacy and individual rights appear here a tangible commitment and mode of action. Both commitment and action are responses to the fear of some future dispossession. The people of Shu’fat have already had their land expropriated twice, once in 1948 (their villages or places of origin) and again in 1967.⁷ In addition, the profound crisis of the national political project, contaminates property in the present, whereby one finds oneself currently attached to a property from which dispossession is anticipated in the near future. These forms of engagement with home and its surroundings – expressed as “pride of ownership” – are aimed less at publicly registering the condition of the refugee and more at affirming social life. The sensation of privacy (which is a universal value), the sense of attachment to familiar things and space also marks the emergence of individualism and subjectivity which are potentially linked to the notion of self realization and freedom, both values of political liberalism.

The house for Shu’fat residents is primarily a domestic space providing stability and relief from the hardships and stresses of daily life. We have observed a lot of activity related to home improvement (furniture decoration, renovations of the façade, and so on). Significantly, initiatives to improve homes occur especially in the areas bordering the wall. Beyond the home interior, one also finds expressions of “house pride” These include investments and small improvements on properties, such as gardens, as well as additions of stories and terraces since the Wall was built. For each property, residual spaces are cultivated, even landscaped. Dividing walls between neighbours and delimitation fences are being built. The refugee creates a domestic environment at the same time as reconfiguring his or her relationship with the outside world. Collective stairs to access gardens at the bottom of a slope have also been built by the residents or by the camp committee.

A marriage hall, popularly called “The Palace” has appeared in the middle of the camp. Financed by contributions from the camp residents and the camp’s youth center, this vast marriage hall, colourful and festive, legitimizes the camp as a place of civility, even felicity. On Fridays, Shu’fat refugees’ celebrate their weddings, and non-camp residents may also celebrate inside “the Palace”. The rest of the time the hall is used for shows, ceremonies and local assemblies. The Palace is also utilized as a youth center where *dabke* is taught along with classes in rap. It is a place where each person feels a sense of belonging, as a haven, and not only a place of survival. There has also been investment in the areas of personal health and well-being, such as the construction of fitness centers, and shops selling cosmetics, furniture and sports products are on the rise.



Entrance to Shu'fat Camp. *Source: Noura Akkawi.*

We also observe a high level of land speculation in the camps, and a dynamic market of land tenure and construction (for housing and commercial development mostly in the margins of the Wall). Before the Wall was erected, some second generation refugees, entrepreneurs who had done well in their business enterprises, moved from the camp to Jerusalem. They held onto their property in the camp as a second residence close to their families, thereby demonstrating both the process of mobility from the camp to the city and keeping a foothold in the camp. Today, the movement is reversed: since the construction of the wall, there is also a large number of residents who have returned to Shu'fat in order to maintain their Jerusalem resident rights. In addition, many young people from other towns in the West Bank (and thus with Palestinian identity cards) come secretly to look for work, Shu'fat and East Jerusalem having been less shattered than the northern regions of the West Bank such as Nablus and Jenin.

“We will stay there, we will not be driven away a second time,” say the residents of Shu'fat. For the refugees who stayed, they maintain first and foremost their rights to build, to plant, to improve and beautify their surroundings – to live as fully as possible. In other words, the attachment to the camp (which is largely absent from institutional discourses but found in individual narratives) remains or appears as a form of attachment to individual life and the sense of privacy and also expresses the wish for a future. It is necessary here to point out the gap between collective and historical discourses and personal behavior. Patriotism, national resistance and collective discourse about the right of return and above all the precariousness of the camp and its temporary status are visible as modes of representing the camp as a collectivity. But representations of attachment and belonging to the camp are situated in other layers of everyday practices.

Domesticating the Environment Step by Step

Everyday policies and practices do not only concern commercial or housing development. Investments also extend to the urban sphere and infrastructural development, some of which takes place near the Wall. This is the case in local individual, family or group initiatives to install sewage systems which may not be formal collective effort through the camp committee or UNRWA, but instead rely on separate contracts, mediated by external parties such as the Jerusalem municipality. Requests for the installation of a water pipe in a new property, construction of a building at the edge of the camp, appealing an administrative decision (such as the denial of a permit for building or movement) requires personal involvement with the Israeli administration of Jerusalem. While these are not formal collective efforts, they result in communal activity. Responding to residents' demands for better transport into Jerusalem, the camp committee negotiated directly with the East Jerusalem bus company in order to have to their own line without having to transit through Anata.



Domestic garden in Shu'fat Camp. *Source: Noura Akkawi.*

I call all of these operations the ‘domestication’ of the environment as they open a large framework of personal or communal interactions in order to undo (deconstruct) the notion of enclosure in favor of the legitimization of residents built step by step. All these activities can perhaps be contrasted with the political representation of the camp, as a place of resistance against occupation and Israeli institutions but in fact have consequences in enlarging and changing the public domain and sphere. Actions to improve life in the camp are also seen as advancing the common good of all: “We are all united as the fingers on a hand, refugees or not,” say the residents of Shu’fat.

Towards a Politics of Recognition

As far as the political, urban and philosophical issues raised by my surveys in the areas beside the Wall, several points are relevant. First of all, the range of concrete, formal or informal operations taking place within the enclosure appear to be the way to transform the universe of enclosure into one of intimacy, safety and sometimes into some form of common good. The way of acting in this enclosed space, the various and huge encroachments on daily life, proceed not from some strategy of denunciation, but on the contrary, they creatively address the situation using the existing environment. Like a struggle for the recognition of what is “already present” (*déjà là*) – the actors operate and recognize the current space of life, shaped by personal and affective attachments. These intimate actions widen and enrich the surroundings to produce a collective space marked by various ways of engaging people – a form of political reawakening. Activities at the domestic scale concern common good and politics by weaving the fabric of a livable environment but without relying on any public institution. In these actions, enclosed “citizens” express the desire for safety and autonomy, trust and confidence. The mixture of fear and hope that Palestinians also call ‘pessoptimism’ provides here a theoretical starting point for the notion of dignity and recognition

“We only want to live”, enclosed citizens are saying. This idea of happiness is not expressed in the language of universal morality. It consists in recognizing human capacities and capabilities: exchanging respect and working for a good life. Practical actions for the good life enlarge the notion of the common good towards the definition of common and pluralist spaces, converting collective norms and duties (patriotism, nation and refugee rights) into some common and shared meanings in the present. A theory of recognition could begin as this crossroad: a recognition of dignity and decency based on respect for, and preservation of, the integrity and privacy of persons – even if this remains conditioned by the obtaining of civil or juridical status.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1998.
- 2 See John Rawls. *Theory of Justice*, Harvard: Harvard University Press. 1971.
- 3 The limitation of such “Cosmopolitics” is evident from the re-initiation of the Intifada. The failure of the “peace” process should be understood as the limits of the idea of universal peace and international law.
- 4 International aid agencies poured \$250 million into more than 1,000 newly created Palestinian NGOs between 1995 and 1998. (PNGO, 1999).
- 5 For more elaboration on post-Oslo developments, see my essay “Between War and Peace: Chronicle of a Modern Urban Condition,” in Philipp Misselwitz and Tim Rieniets eds. *City of Collision: Jerusalem and the Principles of Conflict Urbanism*, Basel: Birkhäuser. 2006.
- 6 Paul Ricoeur 2004. *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, Paris, Stock; Amartya Sen 1987. *Commodities and Capabilities*, Oxford: India Paperbacks. See also Honneth, A. 2000. *La lutte pour la reconnaissance*, Paris, Edition du Cerf.
- 7 Refugees come mostly from the old city (Moghrahi quarter) from where they were expelled after the 1967 War and the “reunification” of Jerusalem. Refugees (1948) from Beit Safafa (western Jerusalem), Lyd and other locations are also present in the camp.