

# “Everything Was Anti-Gigantic”

## On Architectural Conservation in Palestine’s Central Highlands

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For seven years, during my work at the al-Bireh-based center for architectural conservation, Riwaq, I travelled with my colleagues in the central highlands of Palestine exploring, documenting, and working on conservation and revitalization plans for the disappearing rural historic centers. We visited dozens of villages from the south to the north of the West Bank. Their historic cores were enclaves of a different lifestyle, with fragments of contemporaneity amidst the generally-perceived obsolescence. Among the threads that connected these villages together was the sprawl of their modern expansions away from their historic cores to the main roads and infrastructure, eager for access and proximity to the city. People’s quest for connectedness further emphasized the perceived image of these historic centers as pure locales, or enclaves that were historically remote and barely connected.

This image, despite some elements of truth, does not accurately illustrate the historical reality of these centers as horizontal, interdependent structures, described by historian Beshara Doumani as fluid spheres of ever-changing social and economic organization, with relative autonomy and self-governance in a decentralized political system.<sup>1</sup>

These historic agrarian settlements in the highlands, along with the scores demolished by the Israeli state between 1948 and 1967, housed approximately 80 percent of the total population of Ottoman Palestine, with their varied histories and identities. Riwaq has worked since 1991 on the conservation and revitalization of what remains of the rural architectural heritage of historic Palestine, most of which currently lies in the West Bank and Gaza.

Palestine has a complex history of a multilayered process of political centralization. Beginning with the decline of the Ottoman

Empire, through the British, then Israeli colonization, and ending with the recent Palestinian state-building project – all have counteracted prior modes of local governance, production, and interdependence to varying degrees.

The central highlands of Palestine have been explored throughout the twentieth century by many voyagers and scholars of the occident and the orient: from the work of Gustaf Dalman, Taufiq Canaan, and Hilma Granqvist, to others who have documented its gradual erosion within this context, particularly after 1967.<sup>2</sup>

Following the Oslo Accords, the region has become the target of local and international organizations for that most sacred mission of our contemporary world: “development.” Counter to the World Bank’s notions of development, these former agrarian built-environments in contemporary Palestine can contribute to new bottom-up, collective, and sustainable socioeconomic and political systems. Riwaq was among the few that have realized the innate potentials of this network of localities, and adapted a decentralized, anti-bureaucratic, and anti-monumental approach to conserving these spaces and finding ways to bring them back to the contemporary focus in Palestine.

In addition to the problematic slogans of heritage-as-development, on one end, and heritage-as-resistance, on the other end, one should be wary of readily fitting heritage conservation within the narrow confines of the nation-state building project. I argue that heritage conservation in Palestine and its highlands should rightly be critical of international agencies’ policies which lead to what Chiara De Cesari describes as the universalization of heritage and its commodification for tourist consumption and economic profit.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to be critical of what Salim Tamari calls the “nativist ideology,” which many Palestinian folklorists hold to prove the authenticity of Palestinian roots in the land.<sup>4</sup> Yet equally worthy of critique is the reshaping of heritage conservation to one of many elements of the state-building project. Such a role implies forms of centralization, hegemony, bureaucracy, and large-scale operations which should be carefully examined in the context of Palestine.

For many who were exposed to the experience of Riwaq, the modern, elitist, Eurocentric field of conservation was re-appropriated and localized. What was a hegemonic, conservative, and highly institutionalized practice was dismantled into what Craig Konyk describes as a “progressive form of activist preservation.”<sup>5</sup> It became a terrain in which conservation has been intertwined with other fields, such as art, architecture, urbanism, sociology, environmentalism, and archivism.

This essay tracks traces of historic and contemporary modes of decentralism embodied in the socioeconomic system in rural Palestine and, on a different level, the organizational framework, philosophy, and programs of Riwaq, including its biennale. The aim is not exclusive to exploring the evolution of Riwaq, but rather highlighting how the wider historic, geographic, and political context in rural Palestine has influenced the institution’s philosophy and approach. Finally, this discussion should be placed in the wider context of the recent emergence of social, economic, and cultural collectives advocating for decentralization and horizontal interdependence in Palestine and the region. Heritage conservation as a practice can play a role in the formation of new

collectives and communitarian forms of solidarity with a modest use of resources. It can also be a lens to critically view not only the concepts of localism, nationalism, and colonialism, but also the notions of citizenship, environmentalism, self-sufficiency, and anti-consumerism.

## **On Heritage as Eroding Homelands**

In 1991, a group of local architects, archeologists, and planners embarked on the idea of Riwaq, for exploring, documenting, and protecting cultural heritage across Palestine. This cultural heritage is inclusive of “all layers, styles, and remains of all periods and civilizations that once existed in Palestine.” This heritage does not only signify the “noble architectural and religious sites, but also the valuable and varied, urban, peasant, and nomad architecture.”<sup>6</sup>

Riwaq’s focus on rural vernacular architectural heritage, on the other hand, was an emphasis on what Fida Touma describes as the “architecture that has shaped the landscape of Palestine for centuries and has been molded by the hands of the average person to respond to his/her needs.”<sup>7</sup> Often referred to as “architecture without architects,” this common architecture prevailed in Palestine for many centuries. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it housed sophisticated systems of production, exchange, and consumption that emerged within a decentralized political structure.<sup>8</sup>

Anti-monumentalism in the context of Riwaq’s work embodied a belief that the architectural heritage of the villages on the fringes of Palestine’s heritage scene, whether in Nisf Jubayl, al-Naqura, Jalbun, or Bani Na‘im, is as important as Jerusalem’s and Nazareth’s architectural gems. It also meant that the deteriorated fallahin (peasant) neighborhoods in the “Throne Villages” of Dayr Ghassana, ‘Arraba, and ‘Abwayn were just as deserving of preservation as the mansions of notable shaykhs as they are an important facet of the indigenous culture.<sup>9</sup>

This focus on rural historic built-environments also stems from a deep conviction that they have become among the few collectively self-managed spaces which are slowing down the rapid pace of encirclement of the geography and society by the colonial and global system. While other places and spaces are suffering from vanishing heterogeneity and the flattening of different social lives into one, there is urgency to the steadfastness of eroding homelands in the local and global context.<sup>10</sup>

Today, visitors can still read the historic centers’ hesitation of being encompassed by the new realities of the village. Their residents are now perceived as “the poor” who were not able to move to the new parts of the village. Others are perceived as those eccentrics who are looking for solitude. For some, it may be the decision of not letting go of certain lifestyles and experiences that do not exist elsewhere. What remained there are not traditional forms of social and economic organization. Yet, some inheritances have survived well into the twenty-first century: there are unique

contemporary forms of strong social relations, high integration with nature, small forms of production, and modern consumerism all in one place.

The central highlands' paradigm defies the current prevailing geopolitics which separates the local built-environments from their natural canvas. Previously, they were seen as one ecosystem. In the present time, extractive economies, agribusiness, tourism, and even the construction industry are rapidly disintegrating local cultures and communities from their surrounding ecosystems worldwide. Despite fierce opposition from social movements and scholars to this economic model,<sup>11</sup> it is increasingly endorsed by international agencies as the way forward for Palestine. A 2013 World Bank report about Area C, an area that comprises almost 60 percent of the central highlands, highlights the economic benefits of specific sectors such as Dead Sea minerals exploitation, stone mining and quarrying, construction, and tourism, while disregarding the grave ramifications of these large-scale activities on the existing economic, social, and natural fabric within the area's local communities.<sup>12</sup>

British economist E. F. Schumacher explains how "small scale operations, no matter how numerous, are always less likely to be harmful to the natural environment than large scale ones, simply because their individual force is small in relation to the recuperative force of nature."<sup>13</sup>

## **Re-cartography**

In the more than twenty-five years since its founding, Riwaq slowly developed programs that served its goals: research and documentation; traditional know-how preservation; historic building restoration; development of legal frameworks for the protection of cultural and natural heritage in Palestine; outreach to local communities through art and cultural programs; and revitalization of rural historic centers. Key milestones in Riwaq's journey include: the publication of Riwaq's Registry of Historic Buildings in 2006;<sup>14</sup> the Job Creation through Conservation program which began after the beginning of the second intifada; the launch of the Riwaq Biennale in 2005; and the inauguration of the long-term 50 Villages project in 2006–7.

During the time that I worked with Riwaq (2007–14), the institution shifted its heritage conservation strategy from single-building conservation to historic center revitalization. Our drawing scales shifted from 1:100 to 1:1000, 1:10000, and 1:100000. Instead of working on a single building, we started to work on one or several neighborhoods of historic centers. Often, revitalization projects would consider the natural heritage surrounding the towns and villages, or would investigate trails which historically connected villages and cities, together narrating the stories of the region.

Riwaq's registry revealed that almost 50 percent of the historic buildings in rural areas of the West Bank and Gaza are located in or around fifty villages out of the more than four hundred Palestinian localities. The 50 Villages project was seen as "a tool to reconstruct an alternative Palestinian map." The institution describes its large-scale

project as a process which “is giving birth to new cooperative matrices and networks that are working together to stitch Palestine’s fragmented landscape.”<sup>15</sup>

One of Israel’s most destructive policies is its erasure of historic horizontal networks of governance and modes of self-sufficiency among Palestinian communities and the superimposition of new ones that serve its domination of geography and economy. Sari Hanafi uses the term “spacio-cide” to describe “the assault on the space, whether it is a built/urban area, landscape or land property.”<sup>16</sup> Palestine’s peasants of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were active in “dozens of overlapping formal and informal networks: the political networks of urban ruling families and the rural subdistrict chiefs, the fiscal networks of sipahi [Ottoman cavalry] officers and tax farmers, and the religious networks of Sufi leaders.” For some periods in history, these horizontal networks had led to urban-rural interdependence in a balanced relation of power. By the nineteenth century, Jabal Nablus,<sup>17</sup> for example, was the largest cotton producer and trader in the Fertile Crescent.<sup>18</sup> Doumani traces the signs of modernization and Palestine’s integration with the world economy as due to a relative level of autonomy and self-governance in a decentralized political system. He argues that Palestine’s response in the Levant to Europe’s industrial revolution was within a bottom-up change that preceded the external forces such as the Egyptian campaign, the Ottoman Empire’s Tanzimat, the British Mandate, and Israeli colonization. This modernization was characterized by commercial agriculture, a rural money economy, differentiation within peasantry, and commoditization of land.

The main impact of Israel’s systematic eroding of the agricultural economy since 1967 has been the depopulation of the rural historic centers which were highly connected to agricultural production. Their spatial organization, compact clustering, location, and use responded to cyclic agricultural practices and merged harmoniously with its natural setting. The integration of the West Bank economy with the Israeli economy had made a rupture in the socioeconomic conditions of the village which was later reflected on its built-environment. By the end of the 1980s, the highlands had become a highly dependent terrain with an external source of income. The Oslo accords’ division of the occupied Palestinian territories and the land fragmentation of the bypass routes system divided the West Bank, according to Hanafi, into sixty-four small cantons rendering it impossible for any Palestinian national infrastructure development.<sup>19</sup> The villages in the so-called seam zone (between the green line and the wall) such as Bayt Iksa where Riwaq has been working for several years are the best example of this devastation. Moneylending and land commoditization, which had intensified in the second half of the nineteenth century under a more centralized political system, characterize the contemporary post-Oslo economic and political realities of the West Bank. The post-Oslo economic policies have significantly eroded the remaining agricultural identity and economic and social lives of Palestinian villages, turning land into “a real-estate commodity stripped of its social meanings.”<sup>20</sup>

A prime example of this erosion lies in the struggle the ‘Arab al-Rashayda are embarking on against the construction of a cement factory on three thousand dunums

of their agrarian land east of Bethlehem. In a recent discussion about community mobilization against the project, one community member explained the impact of such an extractive industry on the livestock sector in the region;<sup>21</sup> the community provides a significant portion of the meat and dairy supply in the Palestinian market, and such a project may undermine domestic food production. The project moved to this region after fierce protest from the Wadi al-Sha‘ir communities in Tulkarm where the factory was first located. Both communities harbor traces of the micro-economics of the central highlands, which is ignored in the Palestinian Authority’s vision of development and sovereignty.

## **On Negotiation**

In the course of the revitalization work in Birzeit, Dhahiriyya, Hajja, ‘Abwayn, and Dayr Ghassana,<sup>22</sup> there were endless debates at the roundtable in Riwaq’s al-Bireh headquarters. The issues spanned independence from international funding to the constant struggle in redressing the power balance between the planners-architects-restorers and the users. We were conscious of the position of the majority of Riwaq staff as urban, middle class, NGO practitioners in the village, and how our backgrounds influenced our perception of the place and the community, and their perception of us. It was always about the two different visions of “the expert” and “the user.” The dynamics challenged us “experts” to position ourselves rather as citizens who would like to participate in moderating change and its effect upon society.

The key question of the 50 Villages project was: what does it take to rehabilitate an entire town, not only physically, but socially, culturally, and economically? Can we really bring life to these historic centers? Do we even have the capacity and agency to do this if there is no desire or expressed need by the community itself? I always thought that our focus was on the “how,” how to propose physical and non-physical interventions which attract people to re-use these spaces that are often seen as “pre-modern.” There was also some focus on the “where”: where should we start, in which villages – the ones which are threatened with losing their heritage in a few years, or the ones which have high potential because of their strong community-based organizations? There was also the “when”: when do we approach this village or the other, and for how long should we work there. And although I thought the “why” was resolved, it managed to find its way to the table a few times. I believe each Riwaq practitioner had their own personal answer for why we have to revitalize these built-environments. It had much to do with their own perception of heritage, the countryside, and their past, present, and future role in society. As for the “who” question, ongoing debates at Riwaq often led to shifts in strategies so that Riwaq changed its role from being a main actor in initiating and leading projects, to also engaging and participating in initiatives led by the communities themselves.

We would discuss the integration in global tourism, the beast of gentrification,

and the local economy of the village. Some envisioned the historic centers as places of alternative living, ways that are productive, self-sufficient, and progressive, away from the recent consumptive and highly dependent lifestyles of our cities, villages, and even refugee camps.

There was a consensus that rural historic centers have distinctive social, spatial, and architectural qualities that make them subject to inventive and open-ended appropriation. We were all searching for any small individual or collective initiative of any form of production to engage with. This is elaborated in Riwaq's description of its 50 Villages project:<sup>23</sup>

Heritage architecture, in this sense, is a dynamic form of enacting change. The concept and definition of heritage has gradually advanced, opening up possibilities for new understandings of urban spaces, buildings, and individuals. These possibilities embrace contemporary activities, meanings, and practices that one can draw from the past to shape the future.

During those seven years I witnessed a “way of doing” that is not top-down, nor bottom-up, but somewhere in the intermediate level. This does not merely reflect the position of the organization itself in the society but also its own process of decision making within the institutional structure.

There was agreement about a decentralized system of work, whether in documenting what is left of cultural heritage in Palestine, or in producing a legal frame for protecting this heritage, or in founding an art biennale. Everything was anti-gigantic. The size of the organization must remain small. Instead of growing into a national-scale organization, the dream was always to sprout like mushrooms all over Palestine. Riwaq's registration of historic buildings, for example, was a production by the masses rather than mass production. For over thirteen years, a network of hundreds of university students and architects volunteered to document tens of thousands of historic buildings.<sup>24</sup>

The organization's decentralized structure entailed several teams working on different programs – planning, restoration, biennale, community outreach, and archive. This exemplified a dynamic and horizontal middle management that was key to operating several programs simultaneously and efficiently without excessive administrative bureaucracy, yet with interwoven responsibilities and procedures.<sup>25</sup>

This also entailed several teams working on revitalization projects in several villages. There was minimal formal structure, and a strong concept of delegation and responsibility-sharing. The role differentiation among different levels of management was relatively minimal. The decision-making process was inclusive and open for dialogue, though not necessarily collective. On the other hand, team members had the flexibility to make decisions that were site-specific, to respond to feedback from local stakeholders and emerging variables that affected project plans.

For example, the identification of still-existing community hubs in the historic centers frequently played a key role in the proposed revitalization strategy. We usually

started with them as lively nodes to expand for creating a larger impact. As the projects progressed, some unseen hubs could be discovered and shifts could be made to include them. Sometimes groups from the community would approach the team to offer renovation services for certain buildings they wanted to use for a particular program. This included residents who wanted to improve their historic houses within *al-‘awneh* program (reciprocity).<sup>26</sup> Such alterations may not be anticipated in the early stages of the project when architects and planners conduct surveys and map the social and economic fabric of the village. I think that we always believed in creating a snowball effect. This was not necessarily successful in all the sites where we operated, but in order to create such opportunities, there was a need for a flexible and responsive framework.

Considering the rapid destruction of cultural and natural heritage, pragmatism was another layer of anti-bureaucracy in the institution, whether on internal or external fronts. Beyond internal negotiations, team members realized that bargaining, striving for consensus, and reaching workable middle grounds, whether in dealing with built-environment or the community and their aspirations, is a central part of operations.

Horizontal networking, on the other hand, entailed interorganizational relationships, vast networks with local councils, national and community-based organizations, local contractors, craftsmen, village residents, local and international experts, and practitioners in different fields.

The most unique quality that I found at Riwaq was “looseness” as a work philosophy. By looseness I mean the opposition to static and fixed definitions and borders for concepts such as heritage, development, revitalization, and geography. Many members of Riwaq stood against defined dichotomies. The lines were blurred between so many conventional binaries: tradition and modernity, intellectualism and populism, avant-gardism and kitsch, localism and internationalism, nationalism and transnationalism, professionalism and activism, work and leisure. This could be for one simple reason – that Riwaq was a compilation of different subjectivities that were often contested and therefore entailed notions of uncertainty, spontaneity, temporariness, and sometimes conflict.

## **On the Biennale**

In this context of looseness and internal contradictions, the Riwaq biennale emerged in 2005. The biennale drew no lines between the organization, the artist, the art project, the audience, and the exhibition. The Riwaq biennale claims to have an agenda of subverting the norms, thinking through structures, challenging monumentality, and questioning the establishment. In its five editions, it tried to redefine the vocabularies and concepts of the museum as colonial and post-colonial institution, and the biennale and art scene as “arenas for monumental spectacles.”<sup>27</sup> It made them site specific to Palestine where these concepts do not make sense in their conventional definitions.<sup>28</sup>

For ten years, this biennale defied the physical and time boundaries of famous biennales. It infused itself not only in the geography of Palestine, but in its immediate

region within the same philosophy of decentralization, networking, and interdependence. For ten years, the village, the primary center of production, the old mecca for merchants, tax collectors, foreign traders, and missionaries, became the destination for a new form of production, a cultural one, that defies an imposed isolation, creating a new fleeting milieu of difference for both visitors and locals, a new lens or a portal for Palestinians and non-Palestinians to read Palestine within a different narrative.

The biennale was cyclic to some: the family of Riwaq, and the wider circle of architects, artists, and cultural practitioners. The closure event of each biennale entailed the start of the preparations for the new edition. There is something intriguing about this cyclic nature, something that resonates well with rooted practices of Palestine; the agricultural cycles, the market and its seasonal trading, seasonal festiveness and rituals, and pilgrimage. It stands in contrast not only to the accelerating path of land colonization, but also with international aid agencies and with the Palestinian Authority's notion of linear economic growth and development.

The biennale visited towns and villages; it engaged with community members whether in the preparations for the biennale events, or the making of the artworks. Some residents participated in the few art performances as in the case of artists Jumana Emil Abboud's work "Eye of the Tiger" in 'Abwayn, or Rheim Alkadhi's work "Collective Knotting Together of Hairs" in Jamma'in, but the community was primarily part of the audience as the visitors.

Perhaps the biennale was sporadic, insignificant, and transient for many of the historic center residents of Hajja, Jamma'in, 'Abwayn, and Dhahiriyya. This occurs with any cultural intervention which engineers new forms of cultural and social interaction in the village. However, there was an accumulative experience over the ten years which allowed for a stronger engagement with the communities. Two such experiences were: Socratis Socratous's installation "A Cave in Dhahiriyyeh" in the Third Riwaq Biennale as part of Qalandiya International in 2012, and Phil Collins's "Cinema Sayyara," a rooftop drive-in cinema in the fifth edition (2014–16).

For a period of two months, the Cypriot artist Socratis Socratous resided in the historic center of Dhahiriyya to create a temporary museum in a complex of subterranean caves – the site of the first human settlement in the town. Dedicated to the history of the village's community, the museum exhibits included memorabilia and family photographs, objects and artifacts donated by the villagers and included in a display which addressed the complex collective histories.<sup>29</sup>

Cinema Sayyara was the latest edition of Phil Collins's "Auto-Kino!" project which was rolled out in Berlin in 2010. Cinema Sayyara was held in Bayt al-Sa'; a renovated historic house in the old town of Ramallah. The film program was collectively selected by artists, filmmakers, and Ramallah Old Town and Bayt al-Sa' neighbors. The project ran for only four weeks (18 May–16 June 2015), and offered a maximum of 21 seats per night. Neighbors living nearby could watch the program from their balcony by using a standard AM/FM frequency, and catch the soundtrack on their radio.

In the event program, the artist explains how Cinema Sayyara was an opportunity

to celebrate “the here and now” before the transformation of Bayt al-Sa‘ into a city museum run by the municipality.<sup>30</sup> To go to that historic neighborhood of Ramallah al-Tahta, climb on the rooftop of a 1910 house, and sit in a car with people you may not know to watch an unusual collection of films was for many Ramallah dwellers a new relationship – with cinema, the old neighborhoods of Ramallah and the pre-held definition of a public event. People brought their children to watch cartoons like Tom and Jerry. I personally watched *Soy Cuba* (1964) for the first time at Cinema Sayyara and it remains one of the special screenings I have ever watched. One of the residents suggested screening *Omar Mukhtar: Lion of the Desert* (1981), an iconic feature of cinema, but also a film which holds a special place for many who repeatedly enjoyed it as part of their Friday television program in the 1980s and 1990s. For a whole month, as if there was the ritual of receiving guests daily at 9:00 p.m. in one of the private neighborhoods of the city – it did not matter whether you were an artist or an accountant, a local or a foreigner – you were welcome in this outdoor/indoor unusual guestroom, to pick what you would like to watch in small moments of collectivity and togetherness.

## **On the Act of *Commoning***

The notion of cycle leaves room for decline, for reflection, and for possibilities of new emergences, but it is also accumulative, it sustains momentum within troubled situations, and it stands against the idea of *tabula rasa*.

During a biennale event in Beirut, Akram Za‘atari and Christine Tohme talked about how they – as cultural practitioners – started their life projects as an answer to certain cultural and political conditions at that time, and how some of the institutions came into being as a product of the failure of previous projects or initiatives.<sup>31</sup> Both emphasized the importance of ending an establishment before becoming bureaucratic or hegemonic, revolving around the ones who founded them. This was in the context of the foundation of key institutions such as Ashkal Alwan and the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, Riwaq in Ramallah and al-Bireh, al-Ma‘mal Foundation in Jerusalem, Darat al-Funun in Amman, and Townhouse Gallery in Cairo which have played important roles since the 1990s in the cultural and contemporary art scene in the region.

Some of these institutions coincided with the visions of the state official bodies. Others collided with them, and some filled a void left by almost non-existent official entities. It is possible to read the work of these institutions as part of the dichotomy of civil society versus the state, but one may need to depart from this dichotomy and to consider the rising flows, exchange, and production of knowledge, within networks of small entities in Palestine and the region, which are emphasizing the small scale while redefining a past decentralized communitarian life.

Do these entities contribute to building new forms of citizenship, a sense of belonging, and ownership to the peoples and places we live in? Do these networks

entail forms of political awareness, activism, and the engagement with vulnerable social groups? Do they foster levels of self-management, inclusiveness, and interdependence?

I believe they do, but to what extent do they pave the way to a new socio-cultural, economic or political scene? It is yet unclear. There are cultural and intellectual commons that are being built up over time. New collective movements cannot be formed without intrinsic individualism and tendency to experimentation, with individual preferences to deconstruct, redefine, and connect different inherited codes, relationships, and networks, including conceptions of the collective and the individual. I believe this is what the region is witnessing right now. It is no longer easy to ignore the growing voices within the region that are calling for new systems of governance based on principles of decentralism, self-sufficiency, communitarian forms of interdependence, and environmentalism, whether from Iraq or Syria, Lebanon, even Palestine.<sup>32</sup>

Today, there are emerging community-based farms and craftsmanship, nature walkers, recyclers, local advocacy and voluntary groups, small educational forums, independent municipal coalitions, small research and publishing platforms, independent groups of musicians, artists, illustrators, and designers. These collectives can significantly contribute to establishing decentralized communitarian systems through active resistance to political, economic, and cultural hegemonies; standing critically against the politics of NGO-ization and the transnational aid industry;<sup>33</sup> and constructing oppositional knowledge which provides frameworks for mobilization and contestation.

As David Harvey explains, no real answer is available to the critical question of the possibility of having “radical decentralization without constituting some higher-order hierarchal authority.”<sup>34</sup> What was explored in this article is not a “preference of pure horizontality”; rather, it is tracing emerging decentralization tendencies that counter different layers of centralized governance and control, national or colonial, in Palestine and including other parts of our region.

Decentralization as a concept embodies smallness; however, no single answer is given to the question of scale either. Schumacher emphasizes how humanity is in need of many different structures, “both small ones and large ones, some exclusive and some comprehensive.” Yet in our current world he claims that “we suffer from an almost universal idolatry of gigantism.” I believe that in Palestine and the region, such paradoxical questions were and are still significant, and the history of Palestine’s central highlands and the field of architectural conservation are engaging gateways to look for fruitful answers.<sup>35</sup>

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## Endnotes

- 1 Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
- 2 See, for example: Shukri ‘Arraf, *al-Qarya al-‘Arabiyya al-Filastiniyya: mabna wa isti‘malat aradi* [The Palestinian Arab Village: Structure and Land Use] (Jerusalem: Arab Studies Society, 1985); Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape* (New York: Scribner, 2007); and Suad Amiry and Vera Tamari, *The Palestinian Village Home*, 2nd ed. (Ramallah: Riwaq, 2003).
- 3 Chiara De Cesari, “Creative Heritage: Palestinian Heritage NGOs and Defiant Arts of Government,” *American Anthropologist*, 112, no. 4 (December 2010): 625–37.
- 4 Salim Tamari, *Mountain against the Sea: Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 109–12.
- 5 Craig Konyk, “Palestine Fast Forward: Riwaq and the Preservation of Progress,” in *Reclaiming Space: The 50 Village Project in Rural Palestine*, ed. Khaldun Bshara and Suad Amiry (Ramallah: Riwaq, 2015), 83–92.
- 6 Farhat Muhawi and Sahar Qawasmi, *Re-Walk Heritage: Ramallah Highlands Trail* (Ramallah: Riwaq, 2012).
- 7 Fida Touma, “Prologue: Why Should We?” in *Reclaiming Space*, ed. Bshara and Amiry, 15.
- 8 Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*.
- 9 Throne villages (*qura al-karasi*) are twenty-four administrative domains (shaykhdoms) which emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the central highlands of Palestine. These shaykhdoms were ruled by shaykhs from rich or “noble” families who served as tax collectors on behalf of the Ottoman central government. “Qura al-karasi: the throne villages of Palestine,” online at [www.riwaq.org/qura-al-karasi-throne-villages-palestine](http://www.riwaq.org/qura-al-karasi-throne-villages-palestine) (accessed 26 October 2018).
- 10 See Naomi Klein, “Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World,” 2016 Edward W. Said London Lecture, 4 May 2016, online at [mosaicrooms.org/event/the-2016-edward-w-said-london-lecture/](http://mosaicrooms.org/event/the-2016-edward-w-said-london-lecture/) (accessed 26 October 2018).
- 11 See, for example, Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).
- 12 World Bank, “West Bank and Gaza: Area C and the Future of the Palestinian Economy” (2 October 2013), Report No. AUS2922.
- 13 E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973).
- 14 *Sijill Riwaq lil-mabani al-tarikhyya fi Filastin* [Riwaq’s Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine] (Ramallah: Riwaq, 2006), online at [www.riwaq.org/riwaq-register/registry-historic-buildings](http://www.riwaq.org/riwaq-register/registry-historic-buildings) (accessed 11 November 2018).
- 15 See online at [www.riwaq.org/50-historic-centers](http://www.riwaq.org/50-historic-centers) (accessed 26 October 2018).
- 16 See Sari Hanafi, “Explaining Spacio-cide in the Palestinian Territory: Colonization, Separation, and State of Exception,” *Current Sociology* 61, no. 2 (2012): 190–205.
- 17 The city of Nablus and its hinterland constituted a region known for centuries as Jabal Nablus.
- 18 Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*.
- 19 Hanafi, “Explaining Spacio-cide.”
- 20 Khaldun Bshara, “Rural Urbanization: The Commodification of Land in Post-Oslo Palestine,” in *Reclaiming Space*, ed. Bshara and Amiry, 93–103.
- 21 See Ma’an TV discussion, “Sharikat Sanad al-asmant wa ‘Arab al-Rashayida – wajah al-shabab al-halqa al-uwla” [Sanad Cement Company and ‘Arab al-Rashayida: Facing the Youth, Episode One], which aired in April 2017, online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnMD1tSEKFs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnMD1tSEKFs) (accessed 6 November 2018).
- 22 For an explanation of the revitalization projects in these towns and villages, see Bshara and Amiry, *Reclaiming Space*.
- 23 See online at [www.riwaq.org/50-historic-centers](http://www.riwaq.org/50-historic-centers) (accessed 6 November 2018).
- 24 *Sijill Riwaq*.
- 25 For more about nonprofit organizational structure, see: C. J. Jenkins, “Nonprofit Organizations and Political Advocacy,” in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. W. W. Powell, and R. Steinberg, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
- 26 *Al-‘awneh*, a traditional barter system of payment in kind, is seen as a social solidarity system by which neighbors and relatives help each other carry out tasks otherwise difficult to pursue individually. This traditional concept has been utilized to carry out housing schemes implemented through the 50 Villages project in which the owner provides labor while Riwaq provides building materials, design, and supervision.
- 27 See online at [www.riwaq.org/riwaq-biennale-previous-editions](http://www.riwaq.org/riwaq-biennale-previous-editions) (accessed 26 October 2018).

- 28 For more on the Riwaq Biennale, see: Khaldun Bshara "Biennales in Palestine: Thinking Art and Making Art," *Parse Journal* 5 (2017):75–95.
- 29 See online at [thebreedersystem.com/artists/socratis-socratous-artist-page/](http://thebreedersystem.com/artists/socratis-socratous-artist-page/) (accessed 26 October 2018).
- 30 For event program, online at [riwaqbiennale.org/img/CENIMA\\_SAYYARA\\_RB5.pdf](http://riwaqbiennale.org/img/CENIMA_SAYYARA_RB5.pdf) (accessed 26 October 2018).
- 31 Akram Za'atari and Christine Tohme, "It's the Thought That Counts," a lecture at Traction 2: Workshopping the RIWAQ Biennale in Beirut, November 2014; see online at [riwaqbiennale.org/en/traction-2-workshopping-the-riwaq-biennale/](http://riwaqbiennale.org/en/traction-2-workshopping-the-riwaq-biennale/) (accessed 6 November 2018).
- 32 See "New Texts Out Now: Mona Harb and Sami Atallah, *Local Governments and Public Goods: Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World*," *Jadaliyya*, 2 March 2016, online at [jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23965/new-texts-out-now\\_mona-harb-and-sami-atallah-local](http://jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23965/new-texts-out-now_mona-harb-and-sami-atallah-local) (accessed 26 October 2018).
- 33 NGO-ization refers to the global NGO phenomenon resulting from neoliberal globalization. Critics believe that such a phenomenon is depoliticizing the work of social movements in their broad political context. See, for example, Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).
- 34 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2012), 84.
- 35 Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*.