

Nishat Awan, Architect

London > Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency in Beit Sahour, Palestine

A residency in Palestine

This summer I spent two months in Beit Sahour, a suburb of Bethlehem, on the Decolonizing Architecture Artists Residency (DAAR) supported by the Delfina Foundation. Unlike artists, generally architects do not do residencies, they have jobs, and this was my first such experience. Of course many architects who choose to work in other ways (that is they don't build buildings), also choose to call themselves artists or to work within the artistic field. But to be able to take, and hopefully use, your skills as an architect on a residency is rare, no matter how loosely that particular word fits. For me this is both the pleasure and the challenge of the two months. Since architecture has its own ways and its own rhythms, one of my main questions before leaving was how to do the residency as an architect rather than an artist? Or to at least use my own set of skills rather than wishing for others. My other anxiety was related to the place itself, after having read, heard, dissected, re-formed Palestine so often in the collective imagination, in the media, news, academic writings etc., how to go there with a certain openness? I also had a vague feeling that I might not make it there. The various narratives surrounding the profiling practices and general harassment at Ben Gurion (Tel Aviv) airport had made me apprehensive, and for the first time in many years, I was reminded of the colour of my skin—the privilege of forgetting so easily taken.

I take my laptop, camera, voice recorder – the usual tools of the trade – worrying if they would get through Israeli security. I shouldn't have worried, they were more interested in me than my things. I worry also about the clothes to take, what is appropriate, what is not? I compare Palestine to Pakistan – it must be more liberal - I can probably get away with skirts? Or can I? Maybe I should take some shalwar kameez, that would solve the weather and modesty problem in one. But then I worry about the Israelis – they will definitely cause me trouble then. A bona fide terrorist in Pakistani gear! I decide not to bother. Whilst on the way into Palestine I wore a long-sleeved top – I always feel too cold – on the way back I decide to wear as skimpy a top as possible, realising that the profiling practices at the airport had everything to do with how religious or not a Muslim I was deemed to be. Although this was a small consideration of what to wear, it gives a clue to the ways in which occupation works. The most effective form of colonisation is that of the mind, of stopping people doing things, changing the way they live. As I return to Europe, I am shocked at how quickly these affects materialise, already I had adapted my behaviour according to their prejudices.

At a conference we attended in Ramallah, one of the speakers described these effects, and the way they pervade everyday life in Palestine, and are reflected back from within the prism of the novel. The horizons of Palestinian writers have shrunk, from the cosmopolitan contexts of the 1940s across the Middle-East that encompassed a contiguous Palestinian spatial imaginary – Beirut, Damascus, Amman, Ramallah were all places negotiated at ease by the protagonists of those stories – to the contemporary novel, which is sometimes constricted right down to the space of a single room. This panoptic effect of the shrinking of the Palestinian imaginary was demonstrated time and again in various encounters. As a Palestinian friend and colleague drove us along a road skirting the edge of East Jerusalem, he related how it had been blocked by a notorious checkpoint during the Second Intifada but had been open for a long time since. Yet, even now very few people used the road – the physical presence of the checkpoint was no longer needed.

The beginning of the residency was peppered with different trips, a visit to the Jordan Valley to see how annexation happens as part of everyday life, not so much through the deployment of armies (although the IDF does of course have its part to play here), but through the strategic deployment of people, buildings and farms. Although I thought I knew a lot about the Palestinian situation, the Jordan Valley is shocking – a forgotten part of a long-ignored reality. There is an easy brutality to what happens here, such as 'the other wall' as our guide from the Jordan Valley Solidarity group called it, a trench dug into the desert sand preventing the Bedouins from accessing local water springs. This 'other wall' doesn't have the dramatic visual impact of the concrete barrier being constructed in the West Bank, but it has similar devastating effects. Other trips were to Hebron, Nablus and a bus tour around Ramallah. In this tour especially one of my main concerns of the residency, and one that is often addressed in the work of DAAR, was given shape. The problems of reproducing the dominant, hegemonic narratives and prejudices is a trap that the Palestinians themselves are falling into as the striking similarities between Israeli settlements and the Diplomatic Village, perched on a hilltop, attested to.

1 'Designing Civic Encounter' was a four day symposium, workshop and tour in Ramallah (21 - 24 July 2011). Curated by Shuruq Harb and Ursula Biemann as part of the online publishing platform, *ArtTerritories*. www.artterritories.net

2 <http://www.jordanvalleysolidarity.org/>



The walls being built in Palestine – the desert wall in the Jordan valley and the West Bank wall.



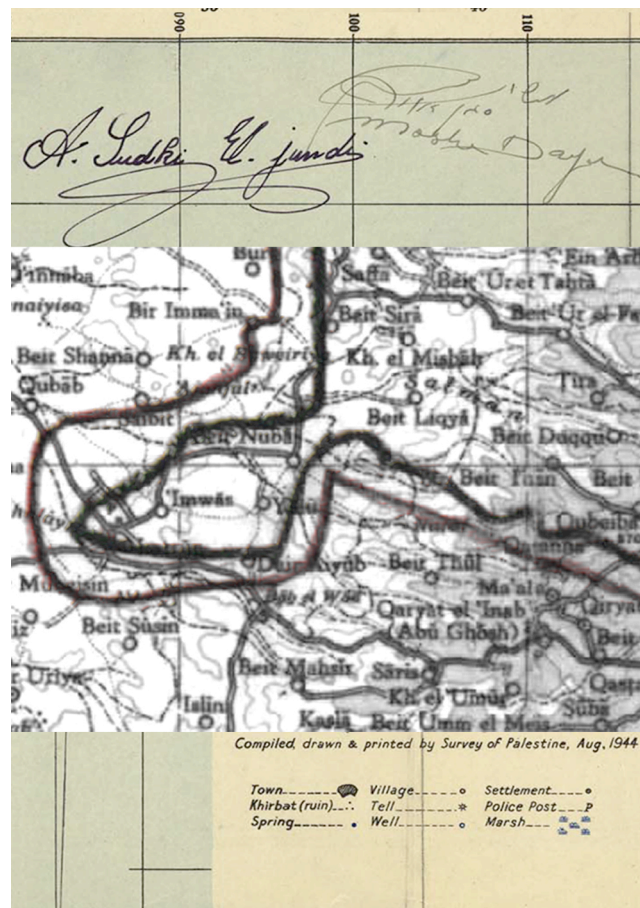
The newly constructed Diplomatic village on the outskirts of Ramallah. One of the many settlements in the West Bank.

The DAAR programme is conceived as a platform for collective production, offering a common framework within which to produce work. Whilst the Delfina Foundation residency is only in its second year, DAAR have been hosting architects and artists for a number of years now. In this difficult context they provide a platform for research and artistic intervention that builds upon the work carried out each year, and so avoids the common trap of starting the process anew each time. This

is especially important for spatial production on Palestine which has become archival – maps upon maps, NGO literature and reports that all relate and analyse a situation. Incredibly important though such work is, there is also a need for more propositional and creative work, which is the realm of DAAR’s interventions.



Much work on Palestine is becoming increasingly archival, yet the archives themselves are in danger.



This year's residency dealt with the idea of the 'common' and for a period of two months, struggling with the ups and downs of collective production, the topic itself seemed apt. How a project and a group self-organises has been the subject of most discussion within the resident group. In collective production, lines of responsibility, conflict and credit overlap and these are echoed in the work we produced based around the various lines that cut across and cleave Palestine. The ambiguity and slipperiness of those lines is, of course, exploited by the occupier, but in the work we produced there was a desire to tease the lines into other shapes, opening up other possibilities and moments of resistance, spaces that could suggest a future 'common'.

A total of ten residents participated this year coming from various parts of the world and for varying lengths of time. The two Delfina residents as we were known, artist Cressida Kocienski and I, spent the longest there. Whilst we were generously supported by the Delfina Foundation, others supported themselves and so could not stay long. Since the DAAR residency is part of a long-term project by Decolonizing Architecture, the residents produced work within the framework of DAAR and very much led by the directors of the programme. Much of what we did was research based work on the various lines that cut across Israel/Palestine, looking for instances of legal ambiguity: spaces that either have an indeterminate sovereignty or are caught within the thickness of the line. We also conducted interviews with various people on the subject of the Palestinian Parliament, including Basem Al Masri from the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), Khalil Tufakji, a cartographer and demographer very much involved in the negotiating and drawing of the borders and boundaries of Oslo, Abu Ala of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and ex-President of the PLC, Fajr Harb, a Palestinian activist involved in the recent youth movement and the Oxford academic, Karma Nabulsi. Our status as residents working with DAAR granted us access to these important figures within the Palestinian political landscape. Being located in Palestine, alongside the privilege of access also came the privilege of mobility. This time simply due to our status as 'internationals' the superimposed geography of Israeli bypass roads was available to us. The difference in journey times, the ease of passing through checkpoints, varied with our companions – a significant difference when travelling in a vehicle with UNESCO licence plates, to when travelling in a Palestinian car.

The two months of the residency passed quickly and we produced material for two exhibitions. Whilst I began the residency with apprehension, wondering how my training as an architect would negotiate an unfamiliar terrain that is the usual place of an artist, I ended it with a broad understanding of many of the issues at stake in Palestine and a specialised knowledge of the "legal-illegal" spatial practices of the State of Israel. I also have a strong desire to return in order to build on the knowledge I have gained and to learn more. It is hard to say good-bye to Palestinian friends and colleagues since it is difficult or often impossible for them to leave – all you have left is a promise to return.

3 The Delfina Foundation covered the costs of flights, rent and provided a local travel allowance. For more information on the residency see, <http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/camp/>

4 DAAR, *Common Assembly. Deterritorializing the Palestinian Parliament* at Le Centre d'Art Neuchâtel, Switzerland (17 Sept – 28 Oct 2011) & Nottingham Contemporary, UK (26 Jan – 12 Apr 2012).

5 Nicola Perugini, 'Legal Voids' (Unpublished essay, 2011)



The empty parliament building in Abu Dis. Photo: Livia Minoja.

"Palestinian Parliament in exile", Amman, 1984. Film still: DAAR (Video operator and editor Cressida Kocienski, Delfina Foundation Palestine with Ghassan Bannoura). Archive footage courtesy PBC.

Nishat Awan was architect in residence at Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR) in Palestine, from July to September 2011. She was selected as part of a collaboration with The Delfina Foundation which provides opportunities for a UK-based artist and architect to live and work at the DAAR's studio in Palestine. Founded by Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal and Eyal Weizman, Decolonizing Architecture has a studio/residency program in Beit Sahour that engages in spatial research and theory, taking the conflict over Palestine as their main case study into processes of decolonization.

Nishat researches and teaches between Berlin and Sheffield. Her research interests include the production and representation of migratory spaces, inquiries into the topological as method and alternative modes of architectural practice. She also collaborates with computational designer, Phil Langley, as www.openkhana.net.