Lifta after Zionist planning
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What to all appearances resembles a preservation and development project, is in fact a rewrite of history. A short survey of the life and times of a Palestinian village.

In its present derelict, largely abandoned state, Lifta, a village just outside of Jerusalem, captures the moment of destruction of Palestinian life in 1948, when Israeli forces conquered it. Lifta’s 2,000 villagers fled – mostly to East Jerusalem and the Ramallah area. However, unlike many of the 530 Palestinian villages and towns also conquered and usually bulldozed during the war, many of Lifta’s 450 houses remained untouched; yet the village was never ‘officially’ resettled. This does not mean that all the original houses remained vacant. Several Jewish families did move (illegally) into former Palestinian homes. Some of these families have lived there for a number of decades, and seem to have become permanent residents. In another part of the village, people from the fringes of society have settled: drug addicts and dealers, run-away teenagers, as well as nature freaks. Even so, several dozen houses, some now falling apart, have remained empty. They stand as monuments marking the events that took place here during the 1948 War.

Over the years, Lifta has remained a different and unique place, for several reasons. Geographically, it is part of the ‘new’ West Jerusalem; however, it represents and symbolizes the architecture and the topography of Palestinian towns. Lifta stayed put, as if frozen in time. Topographically, it is located lower than its surroundings; this gives the feeling that Lifta somehow exists beneath the surface of the city, it seems to occupy a different level of history, geography and society. Those who have inhabited Lifta since 1948 are the ‘others’, in the context of the larger Israeli public. They live outside the borders of law and order, and even outside our vision, since they usually go about their shady business down below, near the village’s fountain. Many of Lifta’s refugees live today in East Jerusalem, not far from their village.

Now, a new development plan intends to turn Lifta into exclusive real estate. The plan would transform the village into an expensive residential area, with shops, a hotel and open green areas, while at the same time maintaining its village atmosphere and keeping some of its original buildings and structures. The plan as submitted to the Jerusalem Municipality Planning Committee in 2004 was approved by a regional committee.

Upon perusal, this plan, together with an earlier development plan from the 1980s reveals consistent attitudes for reshaping the abandoned Palestinian village. It is of great significance that the plan does not ignore the many village remains; on the contrary, these are deconstructed and become a central element of the new design, with dozens of them marked for preservation. In addition, the natural scenery of the place – the spring, trees, and terraces – is a major component of the plan, which strives to preserve the authentic surroundings of Lifta.

Israeli authorities took part in creating the plan, and also gave it official approval, and for this reason it is informative to observe the connection between state ideology and planning. Lifta has been partially in ruins since it was conquered in 1948. The concomitant lands were confiscated by the State. However, the center of the village was never rebuilt. Today, there are some 55 Palestinian houses remaining from the original 450, some standing intact while others are almost entirely derelict. Several houses – those closest to the road leading to Jerusalem – were occupied decades ago, by Jewish families who still live there. These families apparently will not be evacuated when the new construction plan is implemented.

The plan’s goal, as stated in the document, is to build residential areas, some of them preserving the original houses that still exist in the village center. It includes plans to build areas for commerce, shops, public buildings, a hotel, and passesages. In addition, some of the scenery will remain untouched for the public to enjoy.

The trees, spring, terraces, natural stone, remaining houses (complete and incomplete), and the olive oil processing plant are all originally from Lifta. They even have character, like ‘distinctive texture’ and a unique ‘architectural nature.’ The plans are thus not in denial concerning the Palestinian space of the village. On the contrary, they are aware of its advantages and use them, through the practices of preservation, to elevate the touristic and commercial real-estate value of the project.

This comes across clearly in the earlier master plan (plan 2351), which stresses that ‘the area which is subject to directives of preservation and renovation is to remain open to the public.’ Those who will visit the place, and not Lifta’s residents alone, will be able to enjoy the remains of the renovated village, and access to it will not be denied in any way. The aesthetics and the architecture of the Palestinian ruins raise the value of this space, and therefore will be professionally
Lifta is an example of how planning tools are being abused by the Israeli government to conduct a territorial and demographic war against Palestine.

1. More than 500 Palestinian villages destroyed and/or appropriated since 1948

2. One nation – Palestine – is being brutally negated

3. The previous renovation plan for Lifta, based on plan n. 2351

4. The approved renovation plan for Lifta, based on plan n. 6036

5. Now, a renovation project aims to turn Lifta into an expensive and exclusive Jewish residential area, reinventing its history in the process.

8. Lifta in the context of Jerusalem

9. Jerusalem: A war of demography and territory

Israel uses Jerusalem to define itself in the ever-expanding city.
Since the Israeli army drove out the last of its Palestinian inhabitants in 1948, Lifta is a ghost town. As former refugees live mostly in East Jerusalem and Ramallah.

7. Lifta refugee/Yakub Uddah

'A friend of my mother used to live in this house. Hanging from the windowills of her lovely house were the most beautiful flowerpots. As children we often secretly tried to pick the flowers, but she always saw us and said, 'Carry these bags upstairs for me and you can pick a few flowers.' Once upstairs, she explained to us that the picked flowers would wilt quickly in the heat. And so we went home empty-handed.

We go for picnics in Lifta, and I tell my kids all the village stories - about their grandfather, the neighbors, the animals. I sometimes think Lifta memories are even more vivid for them than for myself. And my own memories seem to get fresher, too, if the place reveals more and more of itself to me. There are 57 Lifta refugees in East Jerusalem and Ramallah, and we have a Lifta Association, and now the internet makes it possible to keep in touch with those that have moved further away. We all want to return to our village. I'm sure we can achieve our dream through peaceful means. There's a study by Siemen Abu Sirat that shows that all the Palestinians can go back, and there's enough room for us all to live together with the Israelis. We will never give in. They say that every human being is born in the land, but for us Palestinians, our land is born in us.

Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration.' UNESCO
safeguarded. The ‘natural’ stone – and not ‘smooth, chiseled stone’ – is the permitted building material in that area, so the nature of the materials used is preserved. The terraced landscape will be preserved, as will the trees. Those trees that will have to be uprooted will be re-rooted within the area included in the construction plan.

The approach to this space treats it as though it were almost sacred. It amounts to an effort to revive the village after 56 years of destruction, negligence, and natural decay. Lifta is to be reconstructed from its old materials. It is to be rebuilt around its historic core, as if the center can somehow radiate the authentic spirit of the place. It seems that in the eyes of the planners, the larger, newer Lifta will be a kind of duplication of the preserved kernel of Lifta’s original houses. Therefore, all of the area included in the plan will be built in the original architectural manner. You could say that Lifta is to be not only preserved, but also replicated – many times over. The waste-land that now exists in most of the area slated for renovation will bloom and be filled with the housing of a new and successful real estate project. The nucleus that stood ashamed and battered will be renovated on all its sides. Here the greater Lifta will be established, a neighborhood that will provide a great quality of life for the country’s wealthy people.

Here, we can see not only the familiar ‘making the desert bloom’ typology, of building where nothing once stood, but also the expansion of constructed Israeli areas: an expansion that does not overlook the history of this place, the terraces, trees, houses, spring, etc. Not only is one Lifta being rebuilt, but from now on several duplicated Liftas will exist down in the wadi, right below the western entrances to the capital.

And that’s that. The original Palestinian inhabitants of Lifta are nowhere to be found in the plans. Those who created and cultivated this space, their memories of the village, their exile and longing to return are not mentioned at all. Lifta shows how Zionist ideology is rooted in Israeli state planning.