

RECONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

A FAST conference on the Palestinian village of Lifta
De Balie, Amsterdam, 14 May, 2006

“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

The latest FAST conference explored the issues surrounding the violence caused to, but also created by, the built environment, with reference to the specific case of the Palestinian village of Lifta – now targeted for Israeli ‘reconstruction’. Report by Jane Szita.

In his book, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, Robert Bevan quotes Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic on the destruction of Mostar’s Ottoman-era Stari Most Bridge. “Why do we feel more pain looking at the image of the destroyed bridge than the image of massacred people?” asked Drakulic. The answer, of course, is that as humans we anticipate our own mortality, but expect to be outlived, and our memory to be somehow continued, by the monuments we have loved. “A dead woman is one of us,” she concluded, “but the bridge is all of us forever.”

The destruction of architectural heritage – whether in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Tibet or Israel-Palestine – is the destruction of memory, the very hallmark of identity. When buildings are razed to the ground, so is a part of the culture that produced them. Yet destruction is not the only act that uses the physical environment to rewrite history. Planning and building can have the same effect, nowhere more clearly perhaps than in

Israel today, where the new government has just proposed a completely unilateral redrawing of its borders, and where the obsessive manipulation of space – through checkpoints, walls, road systems, settlements, demolitions, forestation, appropriation and restoration – all contribute to a multi-layered, three-dimensional system designed to propagate a fantasy (Nationalist-Zionist) image, while erasing the traces of indigenous (Palestinian) culture.

WEIRD HYBRID

Addressing the range of issues involved in demolition, construction and reconstruction as political tools, the Reconstruction of Memory conference was organised by FAST as the starting point for its campaign on behalf of Lifta. As several speakers would stress, Lifta is both a typical example and a special case in Israel. As one of a number (variously estimated between 500 and 800) of Palestinian villages cleared by the Zionist project in the Naqba (the Palestinian 'catastrophe') of 1948, Lifta's story is depressingly familiar – murderous attacks by Israeli militia, followed by forced evacuation. But in that Lifta survives as a picturesque cluster of deserted buildings, and was neither razed to the ground nor resettled by the new inhabitants of the country, it is also an exceptional case: the return of the Lifta villagers, who now live only kilometres away in East Jerusalem and Ramallah, remains a possibility. Sadly, however, the official future for Lifta planned by the Israeli authorities does away with this hope, by approving the creation of a luxury residential area for Jews, complete with hotel, mall, and synagogue.

Israeli architect and FAST director **Malkit Shoshan**, framed the case of Lifta in the historical context: the village's tragedy had its origins in the waves of Jewish immigration dating back to the 19th century, and the birth of the Zionist ambition to create a 'better' nation in the supposed empty, virgin wilderness of Palestine. As Shoshan explained, this ambition, instead of foundering on the fact of the preexisting nation of Palestine, instead became a mission to build a new state on top of the one that was already there: "It took 50 long years to redeem the land, dressing it with a new landscape, new people, ignoring the existing ones, and reinventing itself through territorial encounters." Ultimately, the Zionist creation was, and remains, "a weird hybrid of modernity, nationalism, and a biblical glow." The inevitable shadow side of Israeli independence, Shoshan added, was the destruction of Palestine, as

“the biblical claims to the land became a strategic tool used as a rationalisation for the justification of land.” As the gateway to Jerusalem, envisaged in the Zionist dream (articulated by Ben Gurion) as “100% Jewish”, the new scheme to create luxury villas for Jews in Palestinian Lifta gets to the very heart of national appropriation: even Lifta’s name will be changed, to the suggestively biblical ‘Springs of Naftooh.’ Ironically, Shoshan’s presentation demonstrated that, while Palestine is necessarily negated by conceptions of biblical heritage, its survival ought, theoretically at least, to be guaranteed by the modern Western notion of heritage advocated by Unesco – as the postwar institution was founded in order to protect the built environment against destruction in times of wars and conflicts, and defines heritage as including the ordinary environment (streets, buildings, shops and dwelling) and its social structure, and covers recent as well as distant history. Lifta’s buildings and people should be protected by the international community, argued Shoshan.

She finished with three questions, aimed at contextualising the discussion on Lifta:

- What are the criteria for an “ordinary environment” to become a monument?
- If “history is written by the victors”; how can the heritage of “the losers” be preserved?
- How can the planning community address the political and ideological abuses of heritage?

“PERMISSION TO NARRATE”

Against the mythology of the Zionist project, Palestinian history struggles to be told, to attain what Edward Said memorably called “permission to narrate.” **Eitan Bronstein**, from the Israeli organisation Zochrot, works to grant that permission within the Israeli consciousness itself, by raising Jewish awareness of the Naqba. Before Zochrot undertook to publish accounts of the Naqba in Hebrew, these were few and far between. “In order to achieve reconciliation, Israelis must take responsibility for Naqba,” explained Bronstein – not an easy step when, as he admitted, even the date system used in Hebrew negates the existence of the 1948 catastrophe. Bronstein’s film of an action in the town of El Madjul (now justified as Ashkelon), which placed the original Palestinian place names on territories taken over by Israeli settlers, revealed the

truth of his own phrase: "For most Israelis, if we are here, then the other cannot be." In the film, the Palestinian street sign **Zochrot** placed in one locality was torn down, immediately, by an outraged Israeli. This in turn provoked the furious intervention of a Palestinian woman and former resident; yet the confrontation was followed by a kind of dialogue and sort of rapprochement that saw the original remover of the sign actually replace it. Sadly, no one witnessed the removal of the sign dedicated to the two Palestinian villages demolished to build Canada Park in the case that Bronstein recounted next; the anonymous act of vandalism could therefore lead to no dialogue. Why do the Israelis have such a problem with remembering, asked the Dutch moderator, Lucas Verweij.

"They are constructed to act like the man in the video, to defend Zionist memory and culture," replied Bronstein. "The essence of Zionism is the exclusivism of Ben Gurion. To be Zionist and to acknowledge the Naqba is a contradiction in terms." Alternative visions, perhaps inspired by Martin Buber, have no place in this world view.

The destruction of Palestinian memory is also the construction of Jewish forgetfulness, as the next speaker, **Zvi Efrat**, immediately made clear. Israel is built on the grand design of Arie Sharon, he explained, which depends on the mythological "empty wilderness" for its new immigrant towns and invention of new architectural types like the kibbutz and moshav. Sharon's vision meant that the indigenous landscape had to be erased. In the Zionist imagination, the ruins of Palestinian villages became conveniently confused with ancient ruins, allowing their settlement by bohemians (as in Ein Hud and Jaffa, where even today only artists are allowed to live), and the appropriation of the Islamic building style in Israeli architecture – albeit with aggressive militaristic overtones. "I'm not an outsider," admitted Efrat, when challenged by the moderator to state his 'point', and possibly his allegiance. "I run an architecture school, so I'm part of the establishment. I'm an educator though, so it's my job to irritate the system. And this kind of discussion has only been possible in Israel for the last couple of years," he added encouragingly. His 'point', it turned out, was simply that, "the Israeli project is dependent on its ability to produce forgetfulness - to erase Palestinian culture and landscape. But the more you try to repress a thing, the more the repressed returns, and the more monstrous and grotesque it is when it returns." Israel, in such a view, is caught in its own escalating arms race of demonisation, moral superiority and fear. Ultimately, Zionism is the architect not only of the Palestinian tragedy, but of Israel's own.

FROM NAQBA TO NAQBA

From the destruction of giant Buddhas in Afghanistan to the ransacking of Tibet and the architectural devastation wrought in the Balkans, the destruction of memory through monuments – what we might call culturecide – is a depressingly universal phenomenon. The next speaker, **Andrew Herscher**, an architecture academic and expert on war and architecture, admitted at once to knowing nothing of Israel or Lifta, but plenty about the architecture of political violence in the former Yugoslavia. His account highlighted the complexity of the ancient and enduring relationship between architecture and violence: “Violence is often said to destroy memory, but violence can be sponsored to legitimise or be the instrument of memory,” he said. “Violence can be legitimised through the ethnicity of destroying certain kinds of architecture - especially religious types. This way, violence gains cultural meaning.” So, in Bosnia, mosques were either razed or spectacularly disfigured as monuments to the expulsion of the Islamic community: a total of 900 out of 1700 mosques fell victim to this treatment. An obvious parallel can be made with Lifta here, where the mosque was badly damaged and defaced, though other buildings were left standing (this emerged from the later presentation by Yacoub Odeh). Nevertheless – and this point has great topical relevance for Lifta - reconstruction, “a completely ideological word,” is just as dangerous for cultural heritage: “The postwar reconstruction of Prishtina has damaged more buildings than the war,” Herscher explained. “Reconstruction is always ambivalent – it is hard to say what is being reconstructed.” In some formerly war-torn, now ‘reconstructed’ areas of the former Yugoslavia, he continued, communities are now refusing to return; physical fabric is not the entirety of place, as the planning community sometimes still seems to believe, but relies on human, social input too: cultural heritage is flesh and blood, as well as bricks and mortar.

This became abundantly clear with the following presentation, by Palestinian refugee **Yakoub Odeh**. Odeh had lived through the events of 1948, when he was forced to flee Lifta with his family as a boy of eight. Odeh’s account comprised a kind of virtual tour of Lifta’s surviving buildings and memory; there could be no clearer illustration of the connection between architecture, community and culture. The prosperous, happy village childhood Odeh recalled came to an abrupt end when Israeli vigilantes attacked the village café, killing five villagers and injuring seven. The demolition of 20 village houses (those near the road to Tel Aviv)

followed, in January 1948, and by the spring shelling gave the Liftawis no choice but to flee. They expected to be soon able to return to their homes, but are still waiting to go back. For many, like Fatma Aqel, architectural violence did not end with the shelling of their Lifta homes and their forced exile from their ancestral lands. Aged 20, Aqel fled Lifta; five years ago, her (new) home was demolished. "Our people are living from Naqba to Naqba," said Odeh.

THE UNESCO PARADOX

A second view from the ground was provided by the next speaker, **Khaldun Bshara**, a Palestinian conservation architect working for the NGO, **RIWAQ**. In this difficult role, the surprisingly cheerful Bshara, a resident of Ramallah, has to deal with a poor legal framework (only post-1700 buildings are protected, allowing Ottoman-era structures to be bulldozed), and a chronic lack of funding, while attempting to provide better living conditions for Palestians crowded into East Jerusalem slums (a Jerusalem address being essential for an ID card), or squeezed by Israeli settlers in Hebron. "Palestinian architecture is still a target for the Israelis," said Bshara, pointing to the tactical destruction of a Palestinian neighbourhood in Hebron, nominally in order to create a new road. Nevertheless, even under these difficult circumstances conservation work can play a positive role: "In Hebron, we brought back 4,000 Palestinians to the Old City by renovating 600 apartments," he said. Palestinian conservation architects are forced to be pragmatic, he added: "We can't afford to pay any attention to Unesco, nor can we concentrate on design – we can only adapt our solutions to the users' needs. Since Palestinian unemployment is 50% in the country, and 30% in towns, we'd never get money for conservation, so we ask for funding for job creation – and we're now using pre-1950s techniques that are more labour-intensive." Traditional crafts still exist in Palestine, and conservation work is one way of helping to ensure their survival.

By now, the conference had exposed an ambivalent attitude to Unesco; on the one hand, as Malkit Shoshun stated, "If Unesco recognises Lifta, it recognises Palestine, it recognises a nation." On the other, Bshara pointed to the Eurocentricity of Unesco's concepts of conservation: "Lifta should be preserved because return is possible," he said – never mind notions of global heritage or cultural memory. Now Andrew Herscher summarised the paradoxes involved: "On one level, Unesco talks

about global heritage (so its destruction can be a crime against humanity); on the other hand, a practical definition of heritage is up to individual nations. Strategically ignoring Unesco, as Khaldun Bshara does, is very practical, but Unesco can also be strategically used, as Malkit Shoshan suggests.”

MEMORY AND RETURN

The dilemmas inherent in the ground covered by the conference were the starting point for the next speaker, the planner **Shmuel Groag**, whose first comment contrasted the theorizing approach of the Israelis with the pragmatism of the Palestinians, and who went on to point out the clash between notions of Lifta as a place to return to, and as a symbolic site. “Who is the client here?” he asked. “The place itself cannot be the client.” The comment highlighted the power of Lifta as a symbol on the road to Jerusalem; perhaps the reason it has never been resettled, and can never be ignored. For many years, he added, conservation has been seen as a purely aesthetic matter, and the social aspect largely ignored – this is of course still the case in the new luxury-villas plan for Lifta. And, while there is little documentation of the Palestinian heritage, the Israeli project has, in contrast, documented itself exhaustively from the start, all its accounts jumping from biblical to Zionist times to show ‘proof’ of ownership, while avoiding all mention of the intervening Islamic period. For Groag, multi-level concept planning that takes full account of social factors is one of the solutions to the Palestinian tragedy; the other is documentation – including the documents that Israel currently keeps secret. We were back to the essential “permission to narrate” again.

The discussion that followed made it clear that, for all the speakers, the return of Lifta is essential for reconciliation; its preservation as some sort of symbolic space would be strictly second best. Urban conservation goes hand in hand with social preservation.

Yet the next presentation, by **Ciraj Rassool**, showed that the two – return and memory – are far from incompatible, through the example of **District Six Museum** in Capetown. District Six was bulldozed to the ground in the 1960s and ‘70s to create a middle-class neighbourhood; its original inhabitants were summarily evicted. In the land claims that eventually followed, the museum project “arose almost incidentally,”

said Rassool. Its “hybrid space of research” became “an archaeology of memory . . . a means of healing.” District Six Museum is both a memory project and a form of social mobilisation, a resource for the lands restitution process. “The next phase, Hands On District Six, will see the return of the oldest evicted inhabitants to their land,” said Rassool. It was a hopeful note on which to end – but the other speakers sounded notes of caution, Zvi Efrat stating that, “a project of memory is acceptable only if it’s the first step; the next step must be real, we cannot play only with signs.”

Eitan Bronstein, on the other hand, saw “a big danger in instrumentalising memory; we Israelis use the memory of the Holocaust to do awful things to others. We try to remember the Naqba, when infact it’s still going on.” For the village of Lifta – its people, as well as its buildings - memory has to also accommodate the future.

ENGAGING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The conference showed that there is much to learn from international cases, such as the displacement of postwar Europe, South Africa under Apartheid, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, and many other examples. In every case, the destruction of heritage goes hand in hand with the ‘cleansing’ of minorities or undesirable ethnic groups, and violence against physical buildings means violence against the communities, cultures and histories that created them.

The scale of the architectural devastation reflects that of the human and cultural destruction. Moreover, viewing Lifta in the context of these international examples, as the conference insisted on doing, takes the fate of this Palestinian village out of the ‘regional conflict’ context, and presents it as a global problem, requiring a global solution – the intervention of the international community, that was so decisive in South Africa and the Balkans. To engage this international community, it is vital to frame and contextualize the issues surrounding the territorial conflict, the conference suggested.

In this process, the different speakers revealed Lifta’s range of meaning on several different levels. As an ordinary environment that has been raised to the level of a monument to the Palestinian past within the borders of Israel, Lifta is a unique survivor of what was once normal reality before the establishment of the state of Israel. As such, as Malkit

Shoshun stated, to recognise Lifta is to recognise Palestine, and Palestine's right to a written history and preservation of its heritage.

Potentially, Lifta could become a showcase scenario for the implementation of international treaties safeguarding human and cultural rights, the FAST director suggested. In this sense, Lifta is the starting point for a FAST research project into the possible role of architects and planners in identifying the role of building and demolition in ethnic cleansing and land appropriation, and in mapping and analysing – and hopefully, even reversing - that process.

Lifta could even provide the basis for a typology that could be used wherever a similar process takes place. Ultimately, the conference reminded us, there are many other Liftas.

