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EVERYDAY URBANISM BETWEEN PUBLIC SPACE AND "FORBIDDEN SPACE":

THE CASE OF THE OLD CITY OF NABLUS, PALESTINE

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ABSTRACT

Considering the unpredictability of the continuous Israeli military invasions for most of the Palestinian cities, this study takes the Old City of Nablus as a case study to shed light on the importance of everyday life. This paper is part of an ethnographic research on the interrelationship between people and their built environment under an extremely conflicted political situation, and the households' everyday living experiences that present their resistance and "sense of place". It attempts to discuss the responsiveness of the everyday of the Old City of Nablus and its urban fabric competence not only to the socio-economic needs, but also to the accelerated political struggle and resistance facing the continuous invasion and occupation by the Israeli military.

To reveal the silenced stories, the paper's structure follows an ethnographic, exploratory, and analytical approach based on the researcher's observations, interviews, photos, and available literature. This paper serves the research on people's everyday life and urban public space in the city of Nablus, and continues researching the interrelationship between urban and social fabric and how it impacts the function and harmonization of public space, and "*forbidden space*" at certain times. Similarly, it documents and introduces Palestine as a case study that represents the everyday urbanism practices under the occupying Israeli military operations, to available theories for scholars who have discussed the everyday urbanism practices and tactics in different contexts. In this sense, history is incorporated in the phenomenon of this research case study as ongoing implication on both present living experience and space.

This paper attempts to discuss the responsiveness of the urban fabric of the Old City of Nablus to the social and socio-economic needs, as well as the city's political struggle under the Israeli occupation. The paper structure follows a descriptive analytical approach based on the researcher's observations, photos, movie/media, and relevant literature. Starting with a historical background on some of the politics, this paper serves the research on the

interrelations between peoples' everyday life and urban public space in the city of Nablus; and expands to include the implications of politics on the notion of social fabrics and the function and harmonization of public space, and the times when it becomes a "*forbidden space*". By this term, I refer to the dialectical meaning between the "inside" and "outside" spaces while the city is under Israeli attack. While the *inside* is supposed to serve domestic purposes, residents cannot ultimately feel secure inside because of the unpredictable attacks; I will discuss "walking through walls" military policy in the course of this paper. As for the *outside*, people are prohibited to use either streets or alleys due to imposed curfews, while the Israelis themselves are not using them to avoid any counterattack.

Some geopolitical review, Palestine, located in the Middle East, is currently under the Israeli occupation which started in 1948 when the United Nations approved the partition of the British Mandate Palestine into two states, one for the Jews and one for the Arabs. The ongoing Israeli occupation, along with Oslo Accords in 1993, was basically the main reason for the break out of the second Palestinian *Intifada* (Al- Aqsa), which began late September of 2000.

Historically, Nablus has always been a key centre for trade - locally, regionally, and internationally. During the latest Intifada in 2000, the political situation has dramatically changed in Palestine. Seeking a safer place, due to the continuous Israeli invasions to most of the Palestinian cities, including the City of Nablus, most of the people were obliged to leave their houses and go outside the Old City, even though no place is considered ultimately safe or excluded from becoming a target. Though the current political situation has affected the socioeconomic situation in Palestine in general and Nablus City in particular, Nabulsis dynamically resume their everyday life after a disaster as a lively community. While people share using the city spaces, they emphasize the social meaning and the cultural dimension as a

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place of collective use that is perceived through representation and images produced by its residents. The argument here is not focusing on who is living in the Old city of Nablus, rather on the responsiveness of the historic urban fabric to sustain its originally constructed functions.

Changes have taken place under Israeli occupation which have affected the resilience of the city, such as the political and military practices characterized by curfews, confiscation of land and house demolitions, and sieges, as well as human practices and other actions like car use and uncontrolled building and random preservation work, and of course the need for infrastructure and maintenance. It remains an urban responsive complex that has a unique vernacular structure. The focus here is on the hybridity of space due to the colonization and continuous struggle, either directly or indirectly, between the colonizer and the colonized, where the public space as well as private space, becomes a space of resistance and confrontation within the current sovereignty conflict. The hybridity here is a historical product driven by external compulsory forces that affect shaping each space; just as it affects those people who are using the space.

According to Weizman in *Hollow Land,* during 2002 Israeli invasion,[1] "soldiers avoided using the streets, roads, alleys, and courtyards that define the logic of movement through the city, as well as the external doors, internal stairwells, and windows that constitute the order of buildings; rather, they were punching holes through party walls, ceilings, and floors, and moving across them through 100-metre-long pathways of domestic interior hollowed out of dense and contiguous city fabric."[2] This maneuvering makes everyday life activities within the city fabric at any moment invisible; where outside movement becomes the inside and people have no control on their domestic space anymore. Here the political dynamics create another space of flexible medium where the inside is borderless against the outside imposed

sovereignty. In his study of the political space created by Israel's colonial occupation from the deep profound spaces of the West Bank (and Gaza) to their militarized airspace, Weizman unravels Israel's mechanisms of control and its transformation of the Occupied Territories into a theoretically constructed artifice, in which natural and built features function as weapons and shells with which the conflict is waged. In exploring Israel's methods to transform the landscape itself into a tool of total domination and control, *Hollow Land* lays bare the political system at the heart of this complex and terrifying project of late-modern colonial occupation. Warfare delineates both internal and external spaces amalgamated borders where public and private become a space of tactics and sovereignty, and typologies no longer represent the real function of spaces in ways where the meaning of space is distracted. To reflect on such policy in the preliminary fieldwork I conducted last summer 2009, one of the interviewees mentioned that women, while inside, remained dressed up and wearing their veils in case of any unpredicted invasion of their living space, following the Israeli newly introduced military strategy of "walking through walls". These images intersect with de Certeau's argument on the mixed use of space between names and practices, "[t]he presence and circulation of a representation … tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization." [3] This notion might also be debatable when the *utilized* space is threatened by external forces that contribute to manipulate its image.

To elaborate on the "*forbidden space*", I will present two media cases as a method to understand history of the city/the city of the history. The first case is on an edited manuscript that grieves beloved people and the destruction of their memories while struggling to maintain

sanity in the twenty-first-century. *Earthquake in April,* addresses the loss of significant cultural property as part of the widespread damage and destruction caused by the Israeli invasion in its re-occupation of the Palestinian cities on March 29, 2002.[4] The importance of this work lies in the collectivity of images, stories and memories of the many people who contributed to make personal witness of the continuous Israeli attacks against the Palestinian life and culture, history and heritage. It describes and images the painful walking through experience in Old City of Nablus by showing the massive destruction of not only the physical structure but also destruction of life. The struggle continues between the remains and the loss of a past expressed by people; a determination to move ahead and to continue living within the, what is considered in the eye of the colonizer, "*forbidden space*", by all means to confirm their attachment to their roots and history

The analogous second case is *Paradise Now*, a movie directed and co-written by *Hany Abu Assad,* an Arab-Israeli director, which summarizes times of anxiety and tells some of the unreleased particulars. He managed to disclose some of what happens behind the scenes by talking about unforeseen events in a mixture of images between dreams and realities as life continues.[5] It describes another meaning of hybridity in imaging the duality of space to represent both life and death. The movie, pictured in the city of Nablus, humanizes the heavy subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with an intimate story of two lifelong best friends living in Nablus who are sent to perform a suicide bombing in Israel. While the movie does not validate the actors' activities, it also does not judge them. It portrays the hybridism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the mixed identity for the Palestinians who have been living in Diaspora (*el shatat*). Even though the movie has a political statement, the director said in an interview with *The Guardian*, "[t]he film is an artistic point of view of that political issue. The

politicians want to see it as black and white, good and evil, and art wants to see it as a human thing".[6] While the movie concludes the potential for peace coming from an unexpected place, it brings the contradictions of humanity between their internal and external resistance, that affect their decisions and interpretations to their lives and the way they see their surroundings. The director managed to represent the dialectical seriousness and fun animated by politics to feed the sense of struggle and oppression. This might not please the politicians; however, it gives an opportunity to manifest the invisible life of the colonized visa vie the colonizer using the urban fabric of a city that has both mystery and beauty, where the Old City spine experiences liveliness and emptiness, it keeps its authenticity and beauty. When the emptiness is substituted with danger, fear, and death, its fabric keeps stories and memories. The choice to have this movie pictured in Nablus adds another layer of clarity not only on the depth of the internal struggle amongst the different spaces of the city and people, but also the everyday life of a historical city that remains able to incorporate all urban terrain predications. Accordingly, the sequential events create a vast museum of a collective memory where every corner of Nablus city and each of its alleys has demonstrated many stories that people read or keep. The whole city becomes a unique mixture of its past and present, where people share history through architecture in their daily life and memories.

The social urban fabric of the Old City of Nablus correlates with its beauty, simplicity, and spirituality. A question to keep in mind while observing the everyday urbanism dynamics in the Old City of Nablus is "*It is everything, but how can you live it all and cope with its unpredicted episodes?*" This question corresponds to de Certeau's argument on space operation and how it might need to be reformulated to capture new entries; "[t]hese 'ways of operating' constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized

by techniques of sociocultural production." [7] AlSayyad argued hybridity in a *"third space"* that include duality "... situations in which assumed dualities are torn open and the logic of hybridity is introduced. The process does not simply involve the combination or merger of incompatible elements, but instead the insertion of a third possibility connecting originally incommensurable terms and irreconcilable realities."[8] This representation is interpreted by Bhabha's argument that hybridity is "not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, or the two scenes of the book, in a dialectical play of 'recognition' ..." [C]olonial specularity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid." [9] Both arguments on the "third space" emphasize the potential of using the "in-between" space as a space for resistance that the colonial power produces, where the colonial subject hybridizes and the colonizer fails.[10] The whole story remains incomplete except in memory.

While the everyday urbanism supports the traditional urban fabric of the Old City of Nablus, the political hybridization affects its vernacular resilience. When the "inside" is redefined to mean "invisible", and "outside" is redefined to mean "visible", patterns of movements are not governed by the order of space; rather the movement itself produces space around it. This metaphor introduces another perspective on understanding patterns of movement within the urban complexity incalculably leads striking scenarios to defeat the city's customary space. The "outside" space metaphorically becomes Bhabha's "third space" or de Certeau's "site of resistance" and both represent the resilience of not only population survival but also history and culture. The "inverse geometry" that was conceived to turn the city "inside out", shuffling its private and public spaces, would now transform and re-conceptualize the sense of security and the meaning of space under pressured situations.

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Intertwined metaphors lead the process of the Old City survival, and its authenticity manages to secure its long history and culture, however; it needs to protect its future.[11] In order to understand how the built environment of the Old City of Nablus contributes to the "third place", one must recognize the difference between vernacular structure patterns and forces of destruction. While the former refers to an everyday archaic simplicity, the latter represent evolutionary approach to vernacular resilience characterized by regular oppression and continuous destructive attack of its vehicular. The implication of such actions contribute to hybridization of the urban fabric of the Old City, thus requires immediate attention to work on maintaining the history and saving indigenous identity and authenticity. While the Old City had been constructed to respond to everyday urbanism needs, it is currently threatened by transforming its spaces to a contested "third space".

Aligned with the paper's argument is Lefebvre's description of space as being a social product; however, it varies between the perceived space, the conceived space, and the lived space.[12] All these categories make "as if the sum of the individual parts do not equal the whole".[13] The argument that people have influence over shaping their spaces, and that they are in turn shaped by them is valid; however, there are external forces that also contribute to shaping both spaces and people. Such forces are sometimes out of control, mainly when they are related to politics and conflict where their influence is either hard to ignore or predict. Though danger and fear are not physically represented, their implications are reflected on the physical urban structure the same way they are reflected on people. Therefore, the indirect unforeseen danger becomes a force of hybridity that shapes spaces the same as direct forces do. This correlates with Lefebvre's argument of space as social product, and also a political product, and here it's worth reconsidering Lefebvre's concept "the right to the city". How we

will reflect on this concept when a historical place, like the city of Nablus for example, is destroyed, yet gaining more meaning and stronger memory?

The discourse of this paper portrays a unique urban pattern and realizes its profoundly interrelated social, political, and physical relationships, characterized mostly in creating diverse spaces that still function, even under pressured times. The sequential events in different times over history prove the fact that it is movement rather than theory which creates history. It is an example that supports the interrelationship between everyday urbanism and people and how one influences the shaping of the other. This research, though in progress, is based on observations and personal experience. To expand the paper's arguments, a future ethnographic fieldwork is planned to follow up on what could be learned from people about their everyday living experiences at different times of confrontations, mainly in times when each space becomes a frontier and thus may be considered a "*forbidden space*". Taking this further provides better understanding of planning under unpredicted constrains and challenges. Consequently, explicit lessons from the uses and the users of spaces provide evidences and contribute to conceptualizing the physical environment by incorporating people's experiences that represent their attachment, rootedness and memories of their spaces as well as their values and meanings.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. During the 2002 Israeli invasion, Israel invaded West Bank cities, Nablus spent almost 200 days under sustained curfew, when Nablus' residents were forced to spend almost 80 percent of the hours during the period between June 18 to December 31 2002 indoors (often for 24-hour stretches). As such, Nabulsis are well used to such forms of collective punishment. See *World Bank. October 2004. Four Years - Intifada, Closures and Palestinian Economic Crisis: An Assessment.*
2. Eyal Weizman , *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), p.185.
3. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. xiii.
4. Saud Amiry and Muhannar Hadid, eds., *Earthquake in April*, *RIWAQ-Center for Architectural Conservation & The Institute of Jerusalem Studies*, 2002.
5. "Paradise Now" is the first Palestinian film to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. While the film has been categorized by the Academy as representing Palestine, it was produced with European funds by an Arab-Israeli director.
6. Interview. Dan Glaister met Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad and published his article on guardian.co.uk on Friday 20 January 2006.
7. De Certeau, p. xiv.
8. Nezar Alssayad, ed., *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment* (West Port, Connecticut; London: Praeger Publishers, 2001), p. 6.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p.7.
11. Weizman, *Hollow Land.*
12. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: MA, 1991).
13. Christophe Girot, "Vision in Motion: Representing Landscape in Time," in Charles Waldheim, ed., The *Landscape Urbanism Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), pp.87-103.