Unhoming

Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman

The following exchange recorded in February of 2008 considers the project *Decolonizing Architecture*, a partnership between Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti Architects, Bethlehem, and Eyal Weizman Architecture, London. It is an inquiry into sites comprised of the material and affective remnants of Israel's architecture of occupation. Former colonies, military bases, and abandoned infrastructure—all lay bare precarious zones of re-inhabitation and recycling. They also open an entirely new conceptual space, with a single-family home at its center.

Hilal, Petti and Weizman do not dwell on forgiveness. The decolonizing practices they have in mind privilege neither the conventional language of architecture nor the equally conventional political language of solutions. In their view, a viable approach to the challenge of decolonization depends on the participation of a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, on the inclusion of varied cultural and political perspectives—on a dynamic social and political engagement. For this reason, they render architecture as "an arena of speculation" in which to address human relationships, potentials for an agency in the present, and an ability to imagine the future.

Eyal Weizman

This work, which aims at reorienting Israel's architecture of occupation by focusing on its potential reuse, is based on a rethinking of the potentials of our inhabitation of our political and conceptual positions. Such inhabitation starts with questions: From what perspective does one operate as an architect in an environment of asymmetric conflict? How does our architectural work open up new ways of understanding the larger context in which these interactions are embedded? We are very interested in the power of architecture to touch imagination in a way that can shift the discussion from the meta-political level. By operating on the immediate, local level—almost on the molecular level—one can open up possibilities to imagine future life on a much larger scale.

Although Israel withdrew its settlements from the Gaza Strip in September 2005, the strip is still largely under occupation exercised from the walls of Gaza, from the sea, and from the air. Israel also left behind the bulldozed rubble of more than 3,000 buildings. These were mainly single-family homes, but also schools, military installations, and industrial and agricultural facilities built for the benefit of twenty-one settlements and for the military bases that protected them. Prior to the withdrawal, a number of interested local and international parties speculated on alternative scenarios for the possible reuse of these buildings. Such aspirations to reuse the settlement architecture were later flattened into the debris of the settlement's destruction; yet, these visions remain valuable on many different levels.

There are various historical precedents for the reuse of decolonized architecture. Evacuated colonial architecture was alternately understood as a symbol for racist ideologies, as a physical entity embodying power relations, or as the site and instrument of a crime. At the same time, it

Gaza, unilateral evacuation, 2005.

was seen as an economic resource, as a bargaining chip, as an accumulation of toxic waste. Aligned with such modes of understanding were approaches for dealing with this symbolic and material legacy.

Our position in this project is somewhere between subversion and attunement—to materials and to existing life practices. One need not agree with the visions about the future of settlements produced by a number of powerful players—from the E.U., the World Bank, and some of the wealthiest Arab property developers to the various political parties within Palestine and Israel—to be able to see that the very possibility to intervene in evacuated cities, suburbs, camps, and villages presents a rare opportunity not only locally, but in regard to the nature of these sites worldwide. They allow for an examination of more general problems associated with the reuse of the architecture of exclusion, violence, and control, at the moment when such architecture is unplugged from the socio-political-military power that created and sustained it. The ritual destruction, reuse, *redivivus*, or *détournement* of the single-family house may even suggest a repertoire of actions for the possible transformations of these typologies at large.
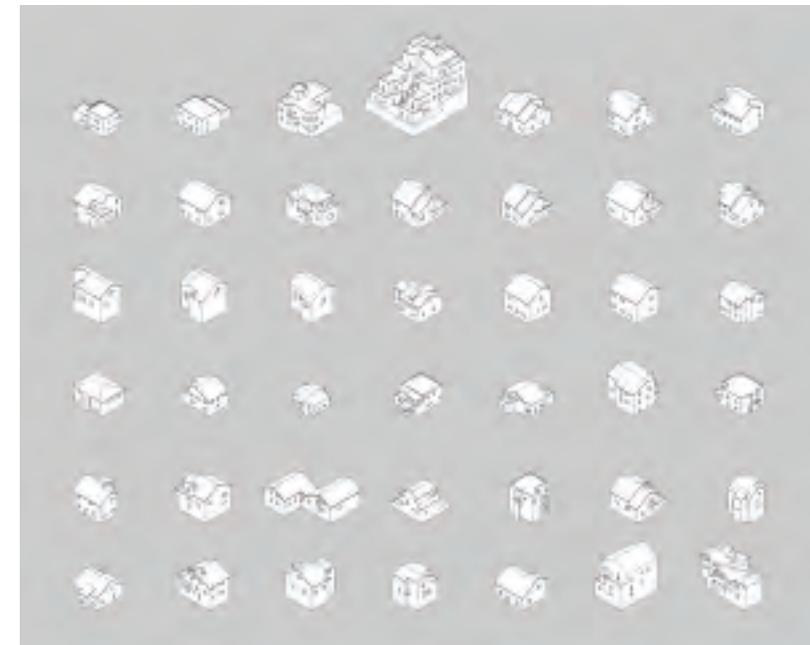
Although there are hundreds of thousands buildings in the West Bank settlements, the number of house typologies is limited to a small variety of single and double family houses. Graphics by Salottobuono.

Alessandro Petti

Before I became an inhabitant of this landscape, my scholarly work was focused on the relationship between different paradigms of security and control and ways in which they produce distinct spatial models. Having arrived at thinking about the complex model of what I call an *archipelago* and an *enclave*—an analytical description of the socio-spatial reality—I felt a need to be engaged in a more tangible work. I felt the urgency to move from a critical and deconstructive discourse to a more constructive and positive approach, despite the catastrophic situation in which we have to operate.

Home typologies
based on images by
Efrat Shvili, 2008.

However, thinking in terms of "solutions" is a common trap architects tend to fall into, a trap that is not always helpful. Living in Bethlehem makes one understand a challenge of the condition in which it is impossible to engage in any kind of "normal" work. Put differently, life practice challenges theories. Contemporary space is not as free and fluid as the prevailing rhetoric of borderlessness would like to suggest. Living in Bethlehem one can easily learn how impervious the boundaries can be; how thick the Wall.

The situation here is very bad. But, that is reality. It does not help to cover it up with some utopian goals and to render them as solutions. Our project seeks to describe what we call *fragments of possibilities*, a set of operations, adaptations, and a toolbox. In fact, we claim that a postponement of a solution is the space where architecture becomes an *arena of speculation*. We attempt to use architecture as an arena of speculation, in which a series of discussions around the problem of reuse, re-inhabitation, or recycling of the remnants of Israel's architecture of occupation would be generated.

This does not suggest some autonomy of architecture as a discipline. It rather suggests that architecture can become a medium for a broader discussion. Architects might want to examine what kinds of scenarios are provided by their getting closer to their own tools—not by looking at what tools can be appropriated from politics.

Clearly, architects always spatialize political ideas. Yet, to ask how one can subvert the spatial structures of the colony remains strategically very important and represents the kind of thinking and questioning for which architecture might provide some answers. Banal steps—an understanding of connections between houses, of ways the topography operates—are, in fact, steps that allow for the political dimension to stay alive and present. Thinking about the future may have far further a reach if it starts from something small. I believe it is possible to think about architecture as a tool that enables new ways of thinking about society, *and* to be grounded in reality. Radical architectural imaginings and people's desires should not exist on two different levels; they must be drawn from— and to—each other.

Our starting point was to look at what was immediate, already in the field. We asked, What kinds of activities, practices, and functions could be hosted within the evacuated structures? What possible new institutions could reshape the evacuated space? What kinds of transformations would such a reshaping entail?

Sandi Hilal

There are interesting and problematic parallels between camps and settlements. Neither can be found on any map of any Palestinian municipality. The camp and the settlement mirror each other by their official invisibility. Ideas to do with "re-housing" of refugees always sought to transform the camps into settlements, by turning refugees into settlers. According to such plans, Palestinian refugees would get houses in former Jewish settlements as a compensation for the homes they have lost. Moreover, new, specifically Palestinian settlement towns would be built as an effort

Aerial image of
P'sagot and El Bireh.

SANDI HILAL, ALESSANDRO PETTI AND EYAL WEIZMAN   UNHOMING

Ungrounding, 2008. Collage, based on photograph by Efrat Shvili.

to domesticate refugees and to shift their desire for return to places from whence they—or their parents—were deported, to an attachment to the new land. Anyone who knows anything about the refugee camps knows the limits of this view. One such limitation is that refugees don't want to live in a home that someone else could later claim as their own.

In today's Palestinian cities everything is about private property; an owner of however small a piece of land feels he must have a right to build his own house there. Years of occupation in which architecture played such an important and negative role have now made it very difficult for anyone to impose rules from above. Struggle for public spaces may be crucial—but it is a difficult struggle. We see the evacuated settlements as an occasion to re-think *collective spaces*. Public space always carries with it a notion of "state-space." Collective space is something else; it indicates access for all—in this case, for both Palestinians and Israelis.

But, how does one move from the concept of a *collective space* to an understanding about what constitutes collectivity, or the histories of collectivities? In our effort to grasp the intricacies of land ownership in and around the settlements, we have faced an important challenge—the existence of a complex narrative produced by individuals and families that owned the land on which some of the settlements have been located. There exist many private histories of the land and of different communities that have claimed it, over time. We use testimony as a way to access such histories. We want to know what architecture can learn from a testimony that cannot be learned from architecture itself; how a *knowledge about the place*, as constructed by its inhabitants, becomes *an affective knowledge about the place*.

There is a small hill in Bethlehem that, before the British mandate, belonged to the Germans. With the arrival of the British mandate, it was claimed by both British and Israelis. Years and years later, with the arrival of Palestinian authorities, many people returned to claim the hill, including the community of German Protestants . . .

All these people have their stories. We need to know what people have in mind when they think about their space. Narration is crucial for this knowledge to exist. It is also strategic. It opposes the juridical machine; it goes beyond the laws of ownership. Narration speaks of the practices of actual use, just as it speaks of the ways of memory.

Eyal Weizman

I would like to return to another hill in the proximity of Ramallah called Jabal Tawil and to the settlement P'sagot as recorded on an archival land-ownership map from the 1950s. On this map, the hill is subdivided into small plots with agricultural fields. Each plot is registered to a family. Tracing these family names one could see that the actual owners,

or their successors, are all over the world: some in Chicago, some in New York, others in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq. . . . These family histories are the intertwined histories of Palestine and of its displaced communities, forced out by the occupation and by professional and economic opportunities overseas. In the meantime, Israeli settlers moved in and formed the colony. They came from the United States, France, Russia. . . . The hill sits in several extraterritorial orbits, of people who were displaced from it and of people who came to it from somewhere else. In fact, the more focused view one takes on a specific settlement, the bigger the orbit of testimonies that are folded into it. Our project seeks to rediscover the history of the land silenced by the massive deployment of the colony, allowing the fragments of land to tell their stories. The map is layered, and so are the stories: while we know the brutality, violence, and injustice of colonialism, we also know that settlers—their lives and dreams—belong to it as well.

In Palestine/Israel, where almost every act of settlement is an act of erasure and re-inhabitation, no one is ever the "first" or the "original" occupier. One always comes after; one is always in a position to negotiate some past, some history. Being a subsequent occupier—either to one's present-day enemies or to an imagined or real ancient civilization—is a condition that turns the inhabitation of old cities, archaeological sites, battlegrounds, and destroyed villages into culturally complex acts of co- or trans-habitation.

Interview with the residents of the village El Bireh, near P'sagot.
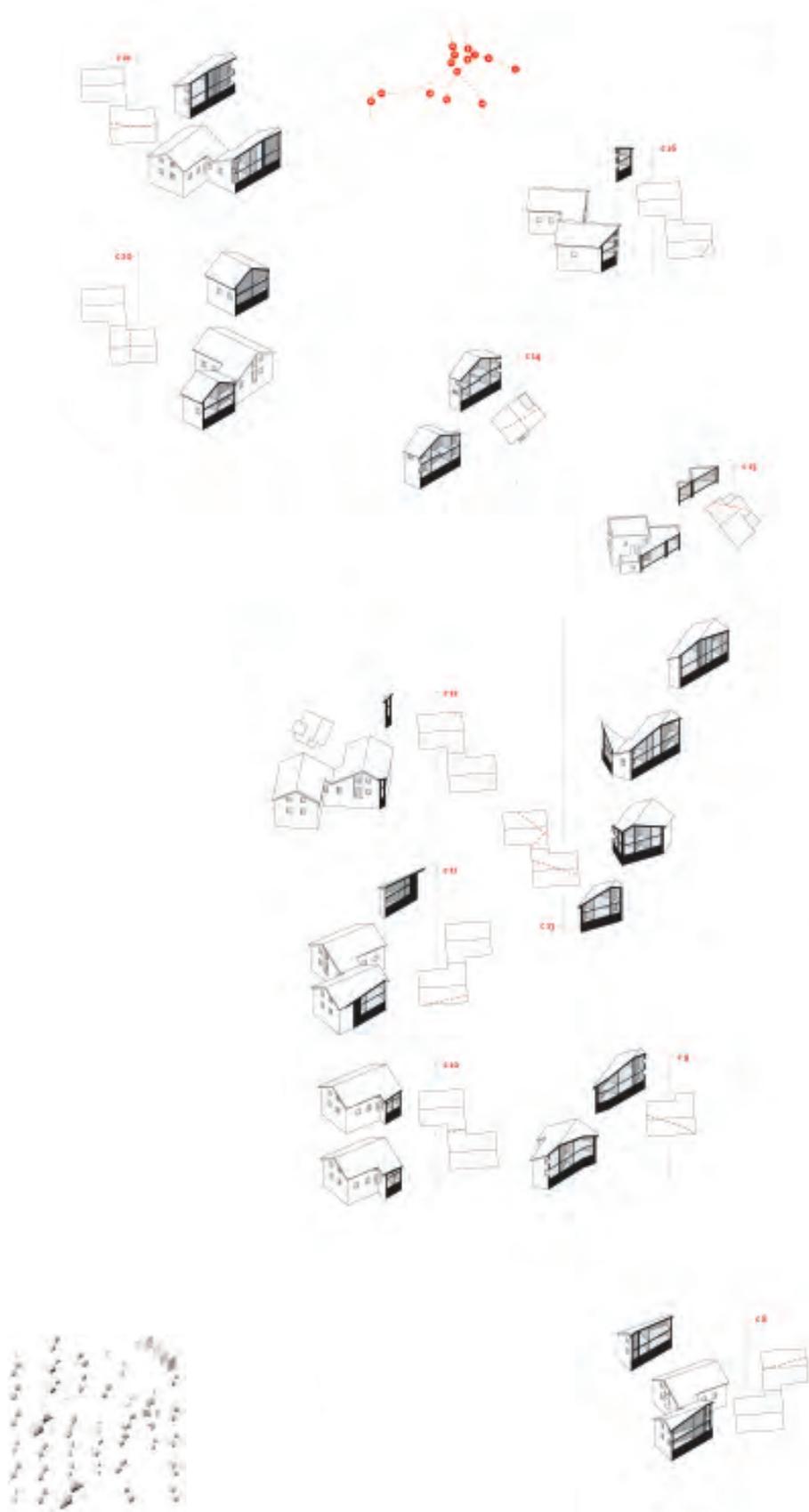
Alessandro Petti

The challenge we have posed to ourselves is to think through the ways in which to spatialize a set of possible collective functions into the evacuated shells of settlement homes. Could single-family houses be imagined as the nuclei of new or traditional types of public institutions? Could they become classrooms in an education center, laboratories, clinics, galleries, offices? What part of the original structure of homes could—or must—be transformed, and what must remain?

These and similar questions guide our consideration of one of the central concepts behind the project *Decolonizing Architecture*: *unhoming*. The single-family homestead is at the molecular level of the occupation of Palestine, an occupation that is largely civilian. This invokes a reality by which an idea of home—a site of power as well as of vulnerability—has been inserted into the social and political landscape, producing limited freedom for some, and an unlimited oppression for others. To "unhome" it means to transform this very logic without erasing either its materiality or its affective potential.

Sandi Hilal

The past will, hopefully, become the past. We are thinking in terms of transformative action. At our meetings with various constituencies, I have met people who said that they would like the settlements to be placed under a glass dome—as a fully preserved blueprint of what the colonization looked like and how it felt. This may be a surprising idea about what would best signal and embody the decolonizing process: yet, it exists, as a powerful historical and emotional commentary.

The most important thing about this project is that it opens a possibility for people to plan their future. They come to the meetings, they talk and they smile. The smile is an expression of agency: to be invited to plan, to make a discourse that couldn't exist before—certainly not for the Palestinians—is a new and extraordinary experience. People do know that planning, architectural or otherwise, is the tool for thinking about the future. In this sense, one could say that the real decolonizing process at stake here is an effort to decolonize the mind that was made to feel it has no right to plan. Attrition of that right has been the strongest mark of occupation.