

SPRING 2010: LORENZO PEZZANI

The first Delfina Foundation international resident at the Decolonizing Architecture studio in Bethlehem is a researcher based in London and a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths University's Centre for Research Architecture. Lorenzo Pezzani's research projects, moving across diverse disciplines and media, have taken various forms (video and audio pieces, installations, publications) and have been exhibited, among others, at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow and at the 4th International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam. His current work looks at how the afterlife of various "things" (buildings, monuments, migrant bodies and images) could activate, through profanation, the production of a new postcolonial ecology. He is also contributing to the ongoing collaborative project *Model court*, which analyses the courtroom as an apparatus that produces legal 'truths' by means of various protocols of spatial and aural performativity.

In the framework of his residency, Lorenzo has been involved in the research project provisionally titled "Area C". Among other activities, DA has organized with him a series of lectures supported by The Delfina Foundation. During these meetings NGO representatives, legal experts and local stakeholders have presented specific case studies of spatial practices in "Area C". The gathered material will be used to generate a theoretical reflection on the subject and to start imagining a range of possible interventions for the unique spatio-juridical situation in "Area C".

"The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. [...] Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical lay-out will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized." F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the earth*

Article by Lorenzo Pezzani

"Decolonizing architecture, or, 'how to inhabit your enemy's house?'"

To some, decolonization could sound like a rather outdated term which evokes unfilled dreams of liberation and equality rather than an operative concept on which to base a contemporary laboratory of spatial practice and critical theory. If this term is used in the context of the conflict over Palestine then, it might appear to others as a "dangerous" word, too politically incorrect and discredited not to raise doubts about an initiative undertaken under its label. But the work of Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman, a group of architects who founded in 2007 the architectural studio and residency Decolonizing Architecture in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem, takes precisely, and somehow courageously, this term as its starting point and tries to reclaim its transformative power. It mobilizes the concept of decolonization to challenge the so-called "peace industry" and the rhetoric of "solutions" to the Palestinian conflict. In a context where the possibilities of intervention seem foreclosed by a largely stalemated political debate and where every form of critical agency risks to be complicit with the apparatus of domination it seeks to dismantle, Decolonizing Architecture represents not only a change of terminology but also a paradigm shift. Their work could be seen as an attempt to answer a simple but crucial question: how is it possible "to find an 'autonomy of practice' that is both critical and transformative"? As DA members recently wrote, "after a few years of spatial research and theory with Palestine as the main case study, in 2007 we have decided to shift the mode of our engagement [...]. Our aim was to extend the analytical reach of our investigation and to engage with the spatial realities of the conflict in a propositional manner". They thus started to develop, in collaboration with a large local and international network of spatial practitioners, a series of projects that engage critically, but also propositionally, with the Israeli architecture of occupation and separation and try to confront it, (re-)use it and subvert it. They use the tools and language of architecture to elaborate concrete proposals that engage with social and political realities and thus stretch the boundaries of what we understand as architecture.

The occasion to start thinking such alternative scenarios was given by the proposal of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, put forward during a conference in December 2003, to unilaterally withdraw all the Israeli settlers and IDF personnel from the Gaza Strip. When in the following months the plan became more and more solid in fact, the question about the fate of the houses, public buildings, synagogues and productive sites that would have been abandoned started to be pressing. An international arena of speculation was opened up by this decision: a number of NGOs, governmental agencies, religious groups, foreign governments, policy think-tanks and private developers started imagining what would have happened of the around 3.000 buildings evacuated. Moreover, the various political parties inside Israel and Palestine themselves expressed different and often contrasting opinions. The question, in fact, was not merely strategic or economical, but had become an hotly debated issue also, and perhaps mostly, because of its complex symbolic meaning. The images of what could have happened to these structures once abandoned by the Israelis acquired a distinct political value. The Israeli government was fearing the potentially disruptive effects on the public opinion of images of Palestinians re-appropriating the characteristic architectures of the settlements. Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conjured apocalyptic images of Arabs living in the homes of Jews, thus reversing somehow the epic images of Zionist conquest. For Palestinians, for whom those buildings had been until then an heinous instrument of occupation, the reoccupation was not less problematic and the Palestinian Ministry of Planning itself proposed the destruction and re-ruralisation of most areas.

In August 2005 though, as the Israeli government finally decided to destroy all buildings and public infrastructures that were evacuated (except synagogues), the debate was cut short and all the plans of reuse were crushed in huge stacks of rubble. For the first time though, the possibility of imagining a different future for the Israeli settlements emerged. It was in the aftermath of this event that Decolonizing Architecture was born. Its fundamental move, though, was to shift its focus from the historical event that the disengagement plan was to a larger area of intervention. After the failure of plans of reuse in the case of Gaza, whereas there was (and there is still) no foreseeable sign of an Israeli decision to abandon settlements or military bases in the West Bank, DA started imagining possible alternative futures precisely in this area. Later, proposals have gradually extended to include also, for instance, the villages abandoned by Palestinians in '48 during the Nakba and other forms of colonial division of space. What could happen to the colonial infrastructure once unplugged from the political power that created and sustained it? The issue has not been to organize a planned, top-down reuse of the settlements, nor to neutralize the destructive impulse that is associated with decolonization. As Fanon wrote, "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon". And if occupation has been enforced through architecture, then, in the moment of decolonization, architecture must burn. Eliminating those architectures, nevertheless, could not be the solution to the problem, but, as it happened in Gaza, could rather bring enormous logistic, ecologic and political problems. The "disengagement plan" left behind tons of toxic rubble that have irremediably damaged Gaza aquifers. What DA has been trying to do then is rather to offer a lexicon of spatial interventions, a laboratory to think and experiment various ways in which people, after an instinctive moment of re-appropriation and destruction, could start dealing with those sites.

In the past three years, many artists, architects, students, sociologists, anthropologists, film-makers and NGO workers from different areas of Palestine as well as from the rest of the world have contributed to the realizations of images, architectural plans and models, short films, atlases and manuals. During residencies and summer schools, people have come and worked together on various specific case studies that illustrate the specificities of the Palestinian conflict but at the same time underline its paradigmatic character at a global level. The production of these collective efforts have been presented in various exhibitions and lectures around the world (just to name the locations

of few of the most recent exhibitions: at Bozar, Brussels between in winter 2008-09; at the International Architectural Biennial in Rotterdam from September 2009 to January 2010; and at Edinburgh Art Festival during the summer of 2010). Among the first proposals elaborated by DA was a series of tactical operations aiming at dismantling the internal organisational structure of the Psagot settlement, in the Rammallah/Al Bireh area. These strategies were conceived not as prescriptions but rather as a series of gradual processes that could foster the deactivation of the settlement's logic of separation and the emergence of new forms-of-life in common. One of the strategies suggested, "un-grounding", envisaged the acceleration of the decay of the existing road and ground surfaces in the settlement. The progressive erosion and removal of the first 10 centimetres of ground, where the signs and barriers (roads, sidewalks, private garden, fences, etc.) that organised the movements of people and vehicles were located, constituted the first step to create a new unified surface that would annul the division among individual buildings and between the settlement and its surroundings. Another category, dubbed "unhoming", imagined ways to turn the suburban single-family housing into collective spaces, thus testing the limits of trasformability of individual homes into public buildings; "de-parcelling", instead, found in a land-ownership map of 1954 the scheme upon which to image a new zoning of private and public areas. Each of these strategies has been presented through models, drawings, archival material and interviews but also through video-lectures and videos realized by photographer and film-maker Armin Linke and a manual with diagrams conceived by the architectural and graphic design collective Salottobuono. In the case of the military base in Oush Grab, in the outskirts of Bethelhem, evacuated by the Israeli army in 2006, DA's projects have also become tools in the daily struggle against Israeli land-grab. After having been evacuated, Israeli settlers have regularly occupied the site in order to reclaim its "property" and try to establish a new settlement but have been contrasted by Palestinian and international activists, among which also members of DA, who have organised various activities inside the former base. The proposal developed by local residents, local NGOs and DA was to gradually return back the base to nature, not creating other buildings but instead adapting the debris of its inhabitation to function as stopover for the thousand of migrant birds that stop in the area seasonally. In the striking images that illustrate this almost lyrical "detournement", storms of birds flock in the abandoned base, suggesting, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben has noted, "forms-of -life yet to be devised".

DA has also produced recently, with the help of designer Diego Segatto, a series of books, each one dealing with a specific concept, issue or case study that has been tackled by DA's projects. These books, printed in a large format, have also been displayed in various exhibitions. One of them, called "Book of Returns", has been produced by DA in collaboration with Alessandra Gola for Zochrot, an Israeli non-governmental art organization that seeks to raise awareness inside Israel about the Nakba. It presents the work that DA has done in trying to re-conceptualize the issue of Return of Palestinian refugees. With its huge dimensions, hard case and long strap that allows it to be carried easily, it is thought as a nomadic device around which stakeholder can gather and discuss. Through maps, testimonies, drawings, analysis and images about the Palestinian town destroyed in 1948 and refugee camps, it tries to free the debate around the right of return from the "suspended politics of political theology" which tended to confine it in an unattainable future and rather map out and intervene within a series of present practices of return.

Currently, thanks to the generous support of the London-based Delfina Foundation, DA has been able to initiate some new projects, among which a yearly two-months residency. As the first resident under this new initiative, I was involved in the elaboration of a new research project focusing on the relationship between space and law in "Area C", the part of West Bank under administrative and military Israeli control.

All of these projects combine and mobilize different agendas, modes of production and strategies. They operate somewhere in-between a theoretical space of reflection which builds up visions and refuses short-sighted solutions and an hands-on practice that is engaged with social and political realities. Intervening in a shifting network of various academic, non-governmental and community-based organisations, DA takes up the role of an NGO without international donors' agendas and institutional deadlines, of an engaged academic research centre and of an architectural practice that doesn't (only) design buildings. Sometimes activists, sometimes pedagogues, architects, artists and theoreticians, DA members change roles and contribute collectively to this ongoing project.

Seen through their projects, the decolonisation of space is a complex collective operation that may concern any apparatus of domination. It should not be understood simply as reuse, i.e. as an attempt to fit new functions in an empty shell, but rather as a constant process that could enable the finding of a common use for what was an apparatus of separation and domination. In fact, postcolonial governments have often recycled representative buildings, palaces and villas built by colonial regimes. In many cases though, the same architectures have continued to reproduce colonial power relations in space. And, as it has been showed in the Gaza case in 2005, this risk is still present. When, unaware of the decision of destroying all the buildings evacuated, an Arab developer from the Gulf offered to buy one of the settlements and turn it into an exclusive, almost extraterritorial tourist resort, it became clear how the control devices of the settlements could have been functional to the realization of new enclaves (as, btw, it has already happened with Sharm el-Sheick, the former Israeli military base later turned into the "paradise" of global tourism). On the other side, those buildings could have been re-appropriated by the Palestinian elite and turned into an exclusive "gated community", thus reinstating the logic of separation that organized its form.

When a few years ago DA started an extended dialogue with various Palestinian associations around these issues, the first reaction to their proposals was a smile. It was a smile of disbelief and disillusionment, the bitter irony of a people that have been fighting for their freedom for the past 60 years, but also, and most importantly, the opening up of a moment of agency, the consciousness raising of the possibility of planning one's future. As Alessandro Petti told me, "when we started working with a Palestinian local administration on the project of reuse of a settlement that was located inside its administrative boundaries (even if of course under the administration of Israeli authorities), we found out that the area of the settlement was not even represented on Palestinian maps". The settlement was a blank spot in the Palestinian consciousness, a sort of repressed collective unconscious whose dangerous surveillance apparatus was not spoken about but at the same time completely internalized to the point of becoming normal. As curator Rasha Salti noted during an event at Tate Modern on Decolonizing Architecture, DA's projects dared to imagine the unimaginable. And daring to imagine the unimaginable is not only the first step to the decolonization of the mind, it is also a fundamentally political act. It expands the limits of what is thinkable and mobilizes the possibilities that this not-yet offers. It is in this extraordinary imaginative leap, in this opening up of a deadlocked debate, that, I believe, lies finally the great value of the Decolonizing Architecture project.

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