

Bare Life, Bare Architecture:

Deconstructing the Violence of Architecture in Al-Khalil, Palestine

Introduction

The political philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of the state of exception has been used heavily to elaborate on the juridical, geographical, and sociological understandings of Palestinian life, whether in relation to refugee camps (Ramadan, 2013), the occupied West Bank (Boano & Leclair-Paquet, 2014), or Palestinian martyrdom (Whitehead & Abufarha, 2008). More recently, there has been much discussion surrounding the consideration of space (Hanafi, 2009) and the role of infrastructural warfare in the necropolitical power of the Israeli occupation (Mbembe, 2003, p. 29). However, in analyzing movement, arrangement, and tracking of Palestinian bodies controlled by the Israeli state, it is necessary to look on the level of the built environment, or the architecture *on* the geography. Eyal Weizman, an Israeli architect, along with Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, have been influential in the development of an architectural understanding of the occupation and aesthetic reimagining of Palestinian futures (Petti et al., 2013). Similarly, this paper seeks to understand the Palestinian state of exception through the lens of architecture, though specifically in the West Bank city of Khalil – or Hebron, as it is more commonly known – in order to uncover the complexities in the synergetic relationship between the production of bare life and architectural strategies deployed via sovereign power. As in Weizman, Hilal, and Petti's work, the term "architecture" will be used liberally here to signify built environments and infrastructure. I argue that the production of Palestinian bare life through the violence of architecture overlaps with the production of a kind of *bare architecture*, or architectural forms that produce the conditions for bare life over which

sovereign power dominates. To elaborate on the importance of bare architecture, I examine two architectural strategies of the Israeli state in Al-Khalil: checkpoints and Al-Shuhada Street.

Background on Al-Khalil

The religious and historical importance of Al-Khalil is indisputable, and understanding it is critical for understanding why the Israeli state deploys particular architectural methods of control in this city specifically. Considered one of the oldest cities in the world – second only to Jericho – and regarded as one of the four holiest cities in both Islam and Judaism (Hebron, 2016), Al-Khalil, better known for its Jewish name Hebron, has been rife with both conflict and conquest. Throughout its history, there were “periods with a Jewish minority living side by side with a Muslim majority” (Hebron, n.d.). However, after Palestine came under the British mandate in 1917, the relationship between the small Jewish population and the Arab Muslim majority in Khalil faced mounting tensions from both the rise of Zionism and the idea of a liberated Palestine. This ultimately erupted into a massacre in 1929 where 67 Jews were killed and 100 more injured (TIPH, n.d.-b). Following this event and the Arab uprising in the subsequent decade, the remaining Jewish inhabitants of Al-Khalil evacuated the city. In the year 1948, with the withdrawal of the British administration, the Israeli prime minister’s declaration of the founding of the Israeli State, and the Nakba, Al-Khalil came under the administration of neighboring Jordan. It was not until 1967, after the Six Day War that ceased Jordanian rule, that a Jewish presence was reestablished in the city. These Orthodox settlers gained legal approval for the Qiryat Arba settlement by the Israeli state three years later (Hebron, 2016).

The renewed and increased tensions from the presence of these settlers have inevitably generated an environment predisposed to conflict that is more often violent than not. Despite the legal prohibition of settlements by the Geneva Convention and strong voices of dissent in the

international arena (UN OCHA, 2007), Israeli settlements in the centralized parts of the Old city grew during the 1970s and 1980s (TIPH, n.d.-b). The clashes and the conflict came to a crescendo a year later when an American-Israeli settler opened fire on a group of Palestinians praying at the venerated Ibrahimi mosque, killing 29 and wounding over 100 more (Wiles, 2014). State powers – both internal and international – reacted with the Oslo II Accords and the Hebron Protocol in 1995 and 1997, respectively (TIPH, n.d.-a). Both negotiations in the supposed peace process established what system of control either the Palestinian government or the Israeli state would have over the A, B, and C categories of land. Beyond the establishment of Areas A, B, and C, Al-Khalil specifically was to be split into two sections under different administrations: H1 to the west under the Palestinian Authority, and H2, most of the Old City, to be placed under the Israeli military (Ferrato et al., 2013). The Israeli military forces had ever more justification to take precautions for the presumed sake of security, and in 2002 indefinitely closed Al-Shuhada, the Palestinian commercial hub in the Old City, to all modes of Palestinian transportation (Youth Against Settlements, 2016).

Despite being the only city in the West Bank that is fragmented in control between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli military (Lambert, 2015), Al-Khalil remains a thriving city in the occupied territories, responsible for about 30% of the West Bank's GDP. Today, the city is home to approximately 215,000 Palestinians and 500 to 800 settlers. The shoe, ceramic, and limestone industries still hold up the city's reputation of commercial and industrial success relative to the rest of the West Bank (TIPH, n.d.-b). However, due to Israeli control over the Old City – both juridical and military – the area has seen massive depopulation as a result of restrictions of movement and risk of harm from military and settler violence. According to a report from 2007 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2007), within

the 10% of the original population that remained in the Old City, unemployment rates rose to 80% and poverty rates rose to 75%. Unsurprisingly, the UNOCHA frequently reports clashes and oppressive settler and military violence against Palestinians in its weekly reports of the city (2016).

Two Modes of Architectural Violence

Lying at the fundamental level of the built environment is the border. Borders demarcate conceptualized separations of different nation-states, jurisdictions, and rules. In Al-Khalil, a city fragmented by legislated differences in control and authority, the precarious existence of the border is evident in the aforementioned clashes between the Palestinian population and the Israeli settlers and soldiers. For with the power to control borders comes the power to dictate the conditions of these borders, especially in regard to who can enter. The sovereign power that the Israeli state has over the different populations of Al-Khalil allows the state to arbitrarily prohibit entry for certain individuals. This manifests in several ways; everyday occurrences include when Israeli soldiers stop a bus at random to check passenger identification, or when they take identification cards away indefinitely from Palestinians they deem suspicious, stripping them of their ability to travel (Crabapple, 2015). The potential to be denied freedom of movement exemplifies the possibility of the suspension of rights, and it is here that we can introduce Agamben's concept of the state of exception. Agamben (2005) contends that the state of exception is "a suspension of the juridical order itself...[that] defines law's threshold or limit concept" (p. 4), which "tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (p. 2). This threshold that Agamben references is essentially the point at which the law can no longer apply, where the sovereign instead relies on authority for and through the exercise of violence. In the context of Palestine, Andy Clarno (2013) takes this

theory further and introduces the idea of *spaces* of exception, where the Israeli state “[has] produced ‘autonomous’ spaces inside the territory over which they [exercise] sovereignty” (p. 437) – namely the regions categorized as Area A in Gaza and the West Bank. This is because the existence of Palestinians cannot be dealt with through legal or political means, due to the Israeli sovereignty’s endeavor for a democratic Jewish state. In the Israeli view, Palestinians in these areas constitute a surplus population that can be easily disposed, essentially relegating Palestinians to bare life, a state of being that is conceptualized “in the juridical order... solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of [their] capacity to be killed)” (Agamben, 1998, p. 8).

It is in Al-Khalil – notorious for the fierceness of the resident “Khalilis” – that I am compelled to understand the infrastructural strategies that keep Palestinians in what can be considered the realm of bare life. Though there is a host of such strategies employed by the settlers, the Israeli soldiers (Weizman, 2005) and the Israeli state (Hanafi, 2009), there are two that best exemplify the power of infrastructure and the relationship between the architectural and the political: Al-Shuhada Street and checkpoints.

Al-Shuhada Street

Al-Shuhada Street was originally the commercial and industrial heart of Al-Khalil that had once pumped vibrant life into the commercial and industrial energies of the Old City. With its numerous shops and bustling residential areas, the street was the engine of economic stability in the area, and an important space in the realm of social life. This was until 1994 when the military temporarily closed the street, citing the possibility of revenge attacks after the Ibrahimi mosque massacre. It was only reopened for traffic, not commerce, in 1997, and in 2000 the road became only accessible by foot. Two years later it was closed altogether (YAS, 2016).

The stark differences in Al-Shuhada can be seen in the images in Appendix A. It is evident from the first photograph that the street's nature as a hub for commerce generated a social space exemplifying community. According to Jan Gehl (2012), a renowned architectural researcher and urban designer, social activities spontaneously derive from "people moving about and being in the same spaces" (p. 12) as a result of necessary activities, such as commuting or grocery shopping, and optional activities or "pursuits...[when] there is a wish to do so and if time and place make it possible" (p. 9). The consideration of these two categories of activities alongside how the built environment can especially be used to foster optional activities is thus vital in any design of outdoor public spaces (p. 11), as public spaces are meant to harbor social interaction. Under Gehl's theories, pre-1994 Al-Shuhada would have been the perfect formula for a social space. But by gradually restricting optional activities, and then ultimately prohibiting necessary ones, the Israeli state shed Al-Shuhada of any potentiality for the social. This strategic process of architectural exclusion successfully contributes to the Israeli project of splintering Palestinian identity and community, pushing Palestinians into the realm of powerlessness and bare life. The closure of the street also forces Palestinian Muslims to take a much longer path to the mosque (Hebron Apartheid, n.d.-a) – another powerful architectural maneuver by the sovereign state to exercise authority over movement and spaces not necessarily under Israeli jurisdiction.

The visual barrenness – the *bareness* – of the space and the architectural environment of the street, immediately visible in the second photograph of Appendix A, portrays a painful liminal space between ruin and reconstruction. Where a ruin would be an act of memorialization, to derive a sense of meaning from what once was, and where renovation, even if by Israeli settlers, would at the very least symbolize the use of a space that was once full of life, the current

condition of Al-Shuhada remains a puzzling enclosure of bare space. The infamous street is now an agonizing blight on the built environment of Al-Khalil, an architectural reminder of the destruction of the city's symbol of community. An architecture that stands without relation to any living interaction is systematically isolated from human activity and can only be significant in its physicality as a sight beheld by the life that surrounds it. This disturbing similarity to bare life – they who are excluded, cannot be made profane – leaves us with the beginnings of conceptualizing bare architecture.

Checkpoints

Checkpoints, a necessary invention for the creation of nation-states and borders in the age of modernity, are spaces of individual violence powered by architectural features: fences, turnstiles, watchtowers, and searches. Waiting between wired fences, passing through turnstiles, presenting identification cards, undergoing arbitrary searches – these target the individual. They break the bonds of identity and community, while reducing the individual to her or his bodily presence in the regulation of populations and the reduction in identity to “threat” and “probable non-threat.” According to Clarno (2013), these architectural features of the checkpoint exemplify the technological advances of the current era that have intensified Michel Foucault's concept of biopower and have heightened regulations of the individual as a means to control populations (p. 455). In this regulatory, claustrophobic, and dehumanizing ritual preceding every religious engagement, daily walks to school (Lorber, 2011), and even entry into one's own home (Hebron Apartheid, n.d.-c), the architecture works to shed the individual of all characteristics outside of the *zoē*, the mere body, that is always considered a potential threat (Clarno, 2013, p. 455). Israel's justification to “other” the Palestinian and thereby restrict movement by constructing checkpoints lies at the heart of the Palestinian state of exception. The physical infrastructure of

the checkpoint is therefore an indicator of bare architecture, in that it is carefully designed to create the conditions for bare life.

Specifically in Al-Khalil, the checkpoints have two foundational purposes: to regulate the number and types of people crossing established borders, and to “imped[e] pedestrian and vehicular traffic” in Palestinian movement (Hebron Apartheid, n.d.-b). Necessary elements of these checkpoints include barriers and closures; some kind of surveillance infrastructure, whether in the form of a watchtower or watchcabin (not to mention the soldiers’ use of the roofs of Palestinian homes); surveillance technology, which usually takes the form of a set of strategically placed security cameras; and a metal detector or turnstile. These features are supported and enhanced by the omnipresence of soldiers (Hebron Apartheid, n.d.-b). Among the thirteen or more checkpoint areas in the Old City alone (UNOCHA, 2007), the one enclosing the Ibrahimi mosque is particularly representative of the psychological violence through the architecture of checkpoints. To enter the mosque, the first of two checkpoints through which the Muslim practitioner must pass is comprised of a control cabin and a full-body turnstile incorporating a metal detector – all surrounded by a narrow passageway constrained by a wired fence. The second point of passage consists of yet another watchcabin connected to three metal detectors. One can arbitrarily be detained and interrogated if any suspicion is said to arise from the metal detector or if a soldier simply finds an individual suspicious (see Appendix B for visual understanding of both checkpoints). These checkpoints close at 9:00 p.m. every day, and are inoperable all day on Israeli holidays, completely barring access or otherwise forcing Muslim worshipers to enter via the roofs of nearby houses, which is a dangerous choice due to the security cameras and guards. Since religious discourse is so embedded in the conflict and debates of the Palestine-Israel dichotomy, the restricted access to religious and spiritual fulfillment, for

the majority-Muslim Palestinians, is evidently an Israeli attempt to demonstrate power over faith and ideology.

The architectural features of the checkpoint effectively induce the psychological and social dehumanization of the Palestinian, further reinforcing the Israeli justification to dispose of the Palestinian population, or as Achille Mbembe (2003) names it, “the sovereign right to kill” (p. 25). In fact, Mbembe claims that the Israeli occupation of Palestine epitomizes necropower (p. 27), in that the Israeli state ultimately seeks to establish “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (p. 14). This is possible through Israel’s territorial, vertical, and – most importantly here – infrastructural strategies (p. 27-29). The strategically placed checkpoints in Al-Khalil can be cited as an example of such infrastructure that works to exert colonial power and bolsters the sovereign’s goal of totalizing domination. Moreover, the basic design of the checkpoint, rationalized through the late modern project of preventing terrorism (p. 29), directly depicts the violence of the state. Though the common understanding of violence echoes Foucault’s as a “mode of ‘acting upon the action of others,’” according to Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir (2009), “an act is also violent when the force is not eruptive and violence is withheld” (p. 101). Azoulay and Ophir argue that withheld violence denotes the transitional space between potential and manifest violence, and this transition “to the eruption of violence is at the heart of state rule and at the base of social order” (p. 103). Whether in the barbed wire fences that suggest electrocution, the heavy gates reminiscent of turnstiles for livestock ready to be slaughtered, or the soldiers at ready with machine guns, the visible elements of the checkpoint become a visual representation of such withheld violence. The checkpoint is thus an architectural reminder of arbitrary state violence that characterizes the state of exception, in which Palestinians are dismissed as bare bodies.

There is a visible overlap in the ways in which the domain of bare life is produced through the checkpoint, an individualizing architecture that regulates, controls, and arranges bodies, and is appropriately characterized by an aesthetic that signals state violence. Such an overlap lays the foundation for the idea of bare architecture, a type of architecture that, as a visible, tangible infrastructure, legitimizes the state of exception and thus produces conditions for bare life.

Bare Life, Bare Architecture

Agamben (1998) traces the concept of bare life back to the Roman figure of *homo sacer*: the banished individual who may be killed (without the one who has done the killing ever having to face punishment), but who simultaneously cannot be sacrificed in any significant, religious sense. Seeing that *homo sacer* denotes *sacratio*, or sacredness, it is important to note that *sacratio* “takes the form of a double exception, both from the *ius humanum* from the *ius divinum*, both from the sphere of the profane and that of the religious” (p. 82). Sacredness creates a form of difference that is preserved by social understandings (S. DeCaroli, lecture, September 27, 2016), which in the case of *homo sacer* manifests in being banished and rendered untouchable.

There is a similarity between the figure of *homo sacer* and the kinds of architectural environments that reinforce conditions of bare life, and herein lies the significance of this idea of bare architecture. To profane architecture would require use of the infrastructure in a way that would signify potentiality; to sacrifice architecture would in a sense be a kind of memorialization, making the architectural space something to be preserved for a certain purpose. The two modes of architecture identified are not open to either profanation or sacrifice. Because Palestinians are not allowed access in it, as in the case of Al-Shuhada, or rendered bare life in it, as in the case of the checkpoints, they have no power to either profane or sacrifice it. Al-Shuhada

is exactly the “ghost town” that the B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (2007), describes it to be. With the empty, boarded streets, a Palestinian can only take a photograph in front of the wire fence guarding the rubble to prove the loss of the heart of the city. It must be emphasized once again that the street, and the energy that was once there, cannot ever be memorialized. Palestinians are not granted the right to ruins, as seen in other tactics of architectural and environmental erasure of Palestinian life, as a result of their being the bare life in this space of exception that the Israeli occupation has established (Lambert, 2013). Instead, Palestinians are in constant proximity to an architectural site – and *sight* – of the space that once was, the wealth that once thrived, and the life they once lived. The loss of community and life reinforces bare life for Palestinians, who are essentially denied these human rights.

As for checkpoints, these methodically built spaces designed for individualized surveillance and regulation of movement, are not spaces appropriate for sacrifice or profanation because their architecture is a visual representation of Israeli sovereignty. How can a people memorialize an infrastructure that is still used to control their bodies and render them excluded subjects? Perhaps it would make sense as a monument after successful decolonization, to immortalize the everyday struggles and sufferings of former Palestinian life, but insofar as the Israeli state resides over the usage of the architecture as a tool to further push the Palestinian population into bare life, Palestinians cannot exercise agency over how the architecture is regarded. For the same reason, profaning the architecture of the checkpoint is not possible. Because the checkpoint itself is a modern biopolitical strategy used to heighten control of populations, as Clarno (2013, p. 455) has shown, Palestinians, as the population over which the Israeli state exercises sovereignty, cannot use the space in the sense that they can refashion it into

a new way of understanding their place in the state of exception. In other words, the only result of checkpoints for Palestinians is their own exile into bare life. Thus, the checkpoint remains a space of dehumanization and the constructed implementation of the state of exception that creates the conditions for bare life.

In addition to the production of the conditions for bare life and the impotentiality for profanation or sacrifice, another characteristic of bare architecture would be the regulation or prohibition of flows. Pre-1994 Shuhada street was a bustling marketplace of free flow, where the movement of shoppers, merchants, pedestrians, and drivers were unrestrained and erratic, as Jan Gehl would have predicted in such public social spaces due to the medley of optional and necessary activities. Al-Shuhada now is a space of absolutely no flow, a dead space. Its lack of activity and hollowness is a visual illustration of the loss of social capital at the hands of Israeli sovereign power. There is a similar lifelessness in the way that checkpoints create a strictly regulated pattern of flows. This restriction and domination is intensified by the withheld violence of the Israeli state that is palpable the instant one passes through the checkpoint as a result of the checkpoint's many apparatuses. Furthermore, in relation to travel, checkpoints obfuscate normative perceptions of time and space simply as a consequence of waiting times and unpredictability of authorization (Azoulay & Ophir, 2009, pp. 186-187).

On those grounds, it is reasonable to assume that bare architecture is something that becomes further prevalent in modernity. As numerous scholars including Agamben (2005), Mbembe (2003), and Clarno (2013) all discuss, this rise in the Foucauldian understanding of biopower in the late-modern age has led to the state of exception being instated increasingly through control of populations and tracking of bodies, though direct state violence – which is evidently frequent in Al-Khalil – is still a threat, a potential that is frequently actualized.

Populations are efficiently controlled through advanced surveillance technologies, as implemented in checkpoints, and strategies of arbitrary prohibitive or restrictive measures, as justified for the closing of Shuhada Street. It is this latency in the sovereign's use and design of the built environment that is most frightening in its efficiency to exert biopower. In her visual essay, Azoulay (2009) names the three methods of architectural strategy employed by the Israeli state to fragment space in Palestine as construction, deconstruction, and the administration of movement. These three "forms of intervention," she states, "have turned the Palestinians into provisional residents of a space whose shape and transformation are forever subject to the whims of the regime and its Israeli citizens (pp. 152-153). Cogent as her argument is in reflecting the architectural strategies of the state of exception, I venture to go beyond these three dimensions, for what happens to the built space and the architecture *after* such deconstruction or construction is also, if not even more, paramount in understanding the continuation of the conditions by which Palestinians are relegated to bare life. This "after" space that perpetuates Palestinian bare life and justifies Israeli sovereignty is the essence of bare architecture. These are the built spaces that etch bare life into the Palestinian conscious by way of sight, movement through their architectures, or both. Because of their very nature as built structures, which are usually perceived to be objective forces of environment, there is an unquestioned element of architectural methods of control. Such normalization of bare architecture both as a mechanism for and as a result of biopower contextualizes bare architecture in late modernity. The potency of architecture in the foundation and justification of state violence characterizes bare architecture as a necessary force in modernity.

Understanding these built environments in the scope of bare architecture also allows us to borrow ideas directly from Agamben's bare life and its inherent potentiality. In discussing "We

Refugees,” a piece by Hannah Arendt, Agamben (1996) ultimately suggests that the way bare life is lived in a unique space outside of the law opens up new ways of re-imagining the meaning of being human and thus of human rights, and lays ground for a new terrain of international relations that does not rely on the modern nation-state. Bare architecture also has this potential, though only after evacuation of sovereign forces. In their book *Architecture After Revolution*, Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal, and Eyal Weizman (2013) study the ways in which former spaces of violence or enclosure – such as military outposts and settler residences – become spaces that re-imagine what a decolonized Palestine could look like. What could be done in the spaces that once housed the enemy or trapped loved ones in the close quarters of refugee camps? The potentiality of profaning infrastructure thus remains the only way to reform bare architecture into something that would no longer represent or promote state violence, sovereign power, or the realm of bare life.

Conclusion

In understanding the Palestinian struggle, it is important to discuss the past and the future, the peace treaties and the violent clashes. However, oftentimes these topics ultimately shadow the present, everyday experiences of the Palestinians living out the struggle. Decoding the architectural purposes and processes of two modes of architecture – checkpoints and Al-Shuhada street – in the West Bank city of Khalil, warrants a new way of thinking about infrastructural methods of warfare embodied in *bare architecture*, as yet another tool for the Israeli state to legitimize its sovereign power and enact violence on Palestinians who are politically relegated to bare life. In epitomizing the refugee as bare life, Agamben (1998) speaks of the potentiality of bare life in the creation of new understandings of the human and the state, despite the depressing conditions that a person in bare life must face as a result of being outside the law and the

framework of rights. In the same vein, Eyal Weizman frames potentiality in relation to built masses that Israeli civilians or state actors have abandoned. Rather than calling for the complete demolition or the memorialized preservation of a certain piece of architecture, he insists on a process of decolonization that makes use of the existing spaces and structures to ultimately meet the genuine needs of Palestinian communities. An especially interesting example is an abandoned military outpost that, once emptied of IDF soldiers, served as posts for surveying wildlife (Petti et al., 2013). This frame of thinking radically re-imaginines the aesthetics of the moments after decolonization, and reclaims agency in a tangible, architectural form. Architecture, in the same way it is a powerful tool that produces bare life and legitimizes violence, can be used as a medium to creatively deconstruct such violence and ultimately undermine the power of sovereignty.

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Appendix A

Photographs before (1990s) and after (2007) the closure of Al-Shuhada Street (B'Tselem, 2007)



Appendix B

Photographs of the first checkpoint, above (Wedad, 2011) and the second checkpoint, below (Khader & Schwartz, 2015) that Palestinian Muslims must cross to access the mosque

