

Il passato è un terreno morto

The past is a dead country

La gran parte delle culture usa il passato per garantirsi una stabilità nel presente, rischiando tuttavia di non vedere l'altro, ma solo sé stesso.

Occorre essere capaci di vedere e percepire una situazione piuttosto che esser calati entro una realtà disegnata dalla storiografia ufficiale e dalla narrativa nazionale. Partendo da acute memorie di conflitti, ingaggiati per difendere l'identità, si può sviluppare la capacità di contenere ogni eventualità e contemporaneamente procedere verso un nuovo inizio.

Ambisco a interrogare i confini tracciati attraverso una lente biografica; in questo testo a questo scopo osservo sul posto/intimamente i resti del villaggio di Kufr Bir'im e del suo vicino Kibbutz Baram nel nord di Israele. L'arte di mappare i rottami può introdurre nuove strategie nell'architettura del conflitto.

Most cultures use the past for stability and risk seeing not the other there but itself.

One has to be able to see and sense a situation rather than be drawn into the reality depicted by formal historiography and national narratives. Departing from acute memories of conflict, enlisted for barricading identity, we can develop the capacity to contain an event and simultaneously progress towards a new beginning.

I aim to question mapped boundaries through a biographical lens; to this end I observe onsite/ insightfully the remains of village and its neighbour in northern Israel. The art of mapping debris can introduce new practices into the architecture of conflict.



Nilly R. Harag

Is a senior lecturer at the Architecture Department at Bezalel and a co-founder of Arctic Architects in Jerusalem. She chairs the research unit Liminal Architecture and coordinates the diploma units. MArch University of Pennsylvania with honors; BDes Bezalel Academy with honors. Recipient of research grants from the TU WIEN Faculty of Architecture and Planning, the Freud Institute Vienna, the Oslo School of Architecture and Granada University. Visiting professor at Carleton University, the Architecture Department of Braunschweig University, the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Malaquais, and the Architecture School of the University of Nicosia.

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"Only what I have lost - is mine forever"
Rachel

This writing is meant to share the secrets behind the existential conflicts I am drawn into while living and practicing in Israel/Palestine. How can I mend my life while experiencing the constant hostility, hate and repeated cycles of war and terror? How can one forget and hope for the better while almost every act of construction provokes historical and national debate? I know by now that I cannot avoid the loaded past but may use it as a tool for questioning my own identity and belonging.

I would like to introduce the concept of dead architecture as debris through which a possible architecture can be reinvented. Probing dead architecture can provide healing methods for the art of living. Accepting the concept of death in architecture allows one to explain and give definition to culture, while containing life in concrete architectural terms. In the ceremony of Famadihana [the dead can dance],² death is perceived as an integral part of life. It is part of the funerary tradition of the Malagasy people of Madagascar, known as the turning of the bones; people bring out the bodies of their ancestors from the family crypts and

rewrap them in fresh cloth, then dance with the corpses around the tomb to live music.³ Death is used to gather the family together while creating an annual reunion.

Why are we so provoked by this tradition? What is it in our Western upbringing that keeps death a distant part of our lives while worshiping our immortality? I argue that the past is a resource most cultures use in order to seek stability, while at the same time tending to believe that through death we are linked to those who have preceded us. We have 'roots' as we often say. Although these roots can give us meaning and direction to grow and develop through time, most cultures seem to reverse the direction of this movement, in becoming overly concerned about the past, associating it with territory and binding the past to it. The problem originates when society fails to accept the fact that we narrate the past as a product of our present needs and concerns. If society relies too dogmatically on its pasts, it risks not seeing the other but only itself.

Place is a segment of territory experienced through an autobiographical lens. A lens is an instrument one looks through to bring new perspectives into focus, enabling the transformation of experience from a magnified self-concentrated space to a wide horizon. The projection medium is the art of mapping which will come to light beyond the rules of cartography alone. It portrays

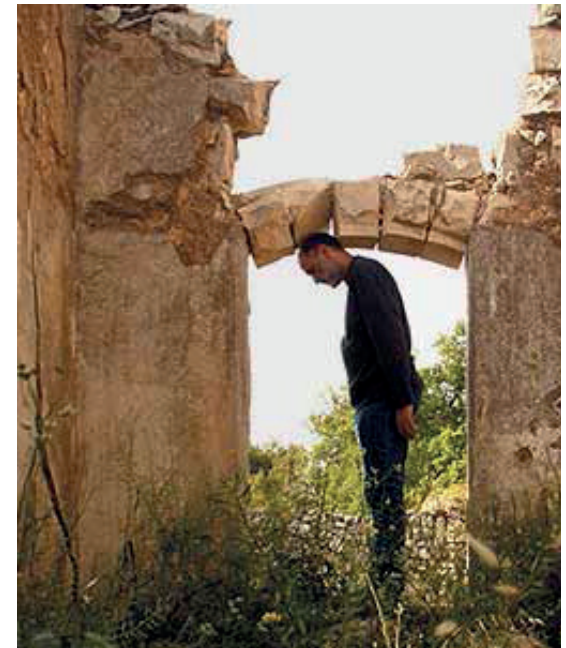


Fig. 1 Model Le Tikun, ReForm a model Hannah Farah, 2011

praxis.

The theoretical gate to the world of mapping enabled the transformation of the process of representing the world on maps; it became an academic investigation while simultaneously being able to render the inner voyage as a personal cultural exploration.

I aim to question boundaries by comparing their appearance on maps with actual remains. These observations will be used as a cultural trigger to study physical spaces. Place is never caught naked in itself; it is always part of the bigger membrane of a concrete fabric based on personal narrative. The art of mapping debris produces a broad cultural and political debate while potentially being able to introduce new practices into the architecture of conflict.

Just as Famadihana, the ceremony of 'the dead can dance', allows the living and the dead to reunite, I reopen the hidden relationship between the two neighboring villages of Bir'am and Bar'am located in northern Israel, close to the Lebanese border. Of these opposing neighboring villages, the village of [Kufr] Biram is discovered through its remains while Kibbutz Bar'am resides peacefully on a hilltop as a gated paradise, fully itself in the footprint of the agricultural lands of the other.

One is full of life while the other is dead. Emptied of its inhabitants. Silence of the debris. (Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

The memory revealed in the liminal spaces between the two villages incorporates existential meaning, not ready-made historiographic facts, while at the same time giving support to nationalism and being used by it. The relationship between the two villages encapsulates the creation-narrative of the Jewish state in 1948, mostly on the sites of Palestinian villages and in the borderline configuration of the British colonial mandate and the remnants of the Ottoman Empire after its collapse.

Bir'am was a Maronite village, captured on November 29, 1948 as part of operation Hiram, in which Jewish forces cleared all non-Jewish villages along the Lebanese international border. Threatened by Jewish violence its citizens fled for their lives to Christian villages inside Israel and to refugee camps in Lebanon. (Fig. 8)

The land was taken by the fledgling kibbutz Bar'am and the village was left as debris. Villagers recall that as a 'friendly' village they were promised to be allowed to come back if they leave only for 48 hours. The promise was never fulfilled, and although the issue has entered political discourse on various occasions in recent years, the situation remains unresolved. Later in the 1950s, in order to prevent any return to farming, the lands and the village were declared a national park. The inhabitants of the



Fig. 3 Kibbutz Baram 2016 © Nilly R. Harag

Fig. 4 Kibbutz Baram 2016 © Nilly R. Harag

Fig. 5 Biram Debris 2016 © Nilly R. Harag

village were robbed physically and mentally of their roots. Ever since, it has stood as a mirror to its ancestors on its scattered ruins. Kibbutz Baram was established on its farmland. I would like to indicate how the next generations of displaced refugees kept their identity, memory and narrative, associated with the land as a dead country. In recent years both sides have even sought dialogue, trying to let a poetic justice prevail. (Fig. 9, 10)

The tactics are well known and nevertheless, as indicated by Noga Kadman, here in Bir'am all the following methods were used: forcing the citizens out, bombing the village to ensure no future use, establishing a new Jewish settlement in close proximity, using the agricultural lands, declaring a national park around the village while planting a forest. The name of the kibbutz was chosen to be phonetically similar—Bar'am replacing Bir'am—and the validity of a Jewish claim to the area established with the rehabilitation of the archeological remains of a synagogue, an act one might see as the operation of selective memory. (Fig. 11)

The process of forgetfulness is dynamic, unlike the fixed memory we carry within us. The use of short-term memory incorporates meaning as an active tool with the intention of sustaining identity. Objective history is too

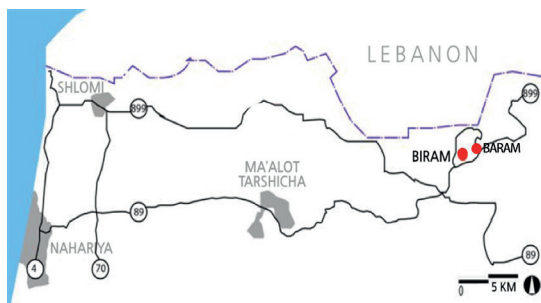
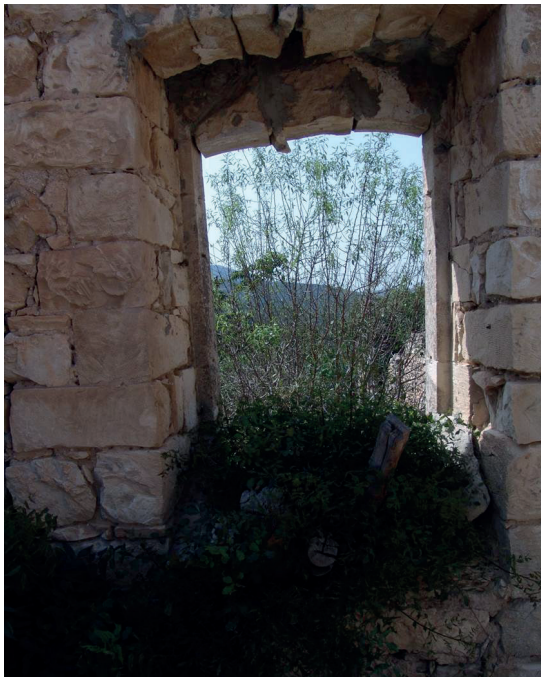


Fig. 8 Situation Map 2016 © Nilly R. Harag
Fig. 9 Biram Debris 2016 © Nilly R. Harag
Fig.10 Biram Debris 2016 © Nilly R. Harag

charged to be read. I see the constant need to set limits to historical narratives in order to project new creative ideas. The context in which the two narratives of Kufir Bir'am and Kibbutz Bar'am were invented was the intention to carry forward the memory of an event; acute conflict or even an invented occurrence. The Israelis use reminiscences of an ancient synagogue as a proof of a primordial belonging and ownership, while the refugees keep the debris as the prime vera-icona and physical embodiment of their lost identity and the injustice of their dispossession. Every year they return to memorialize while chanting the slogans of their injustice.

The displaced have created an enduring pilgrimage route to their village as a way to actively remember their autobiographical roots. The Church is in use as a praying shrine. (Fig. 12)

It is not by a chance that the pilgrimage date was set for Easter—the day of physical and mental resurrection. The concept of Via Dolorosa was reinvented.

It is in some quarters paradigmatic that we need to reshape the past in order to let our culture survive. One has to be able to see and sense the situation rather than be drawn into its layered complexities. Departing from acute memories can provide us with tools to contain an event and simultaneously progress towards a different continuation.

The mechanism driving life, after all, is based on two-way shifts between phantasm and reality, which creates a liminal space perceived as the concept of the uncanny. This challenges our perception and ownership of, authority over, and rights to every space we step on—in particular when it comes to contested land.

Collective memory might be defined as an active field of knowledge in which select past events construct or reconstruct ideas. This selection and construction is influenced by sociopolitical and cultural agendas motivated by cultural consciousness. Collective memory is then enlisted as an effective central mechanism for building identities in individuals and groups.

Following the line of thought introduced by the anthropologist Yona Weitz, we do not claim that there are no historical facts behind the arguments, but we nevertheless find memory to be structured as a comprehensive narrative, in line with Jose Saramago's observation that "we inhabit space but we are inhabited by memories".

The claim that alongside history is another medium, participating and simultaneously competing with it, raises the question of how we represent images and meanings on a particular timeline.

What makes a certain representation on a particular time line preferable and attractive? What is the authenticity of



Fig. 9 The emptied village (from Zochrot website) 1948

Fig. 10 The bombed village (from Zochrot website) 1950

particular historical memories?
A certain social process, with a complicated dynamic, has its own peculiar pattern in which individuals and groups remember, interpret, neglect or just selectively remember part-events as defining their own identities. Basing herself on Maurice Halbwachs' work, Yona Weitz argues that legitimizing cultural codes shape the consciousness and identity of the individual (or group) while producing and regulating identity and consciousness. I have introduced a space which contains memory that can be read on a vertical timeline.

But can I argue that every space embodies vertical memory?

The organization of memory is by definition political. I suggest we use the invented memories that each of us carries, in order to establish new political agendas. I will go even further in suggesting that if we are willing to reopen memories we might be able to create social reunion as it occurs in Madagascar.

In his short article "The Psychical Mechanism of Forgetfulness", Freud argues that sometimes one has to forget in order to be able to see reality without being drawn into it. The current state of nationalistic desire, where all sides in any conflict seek to control memory, is overwhelming: the very attempt is dangerous. I will conclude by suggesting that we have to find a way to open all our

windows and doors and let memory through, as a means to personal transformation, and as a way to set out on the architectural journey to the mental and physical spaces—spaces of justice—"in between".

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Fig. 11 Baram Synagogue 106 © Nilly R. Harag

Fig. 12 Birim Church © Wikipedia