

Seminar 10: Spaces of Possibility

11th February 2009 - Sheffield University, School of Architecture

linesofflight.wordpress.com

Presentation: Yara Sharif, in discussion with Doina Petrescu, Nishat Awan, Kim Trogal, Sam Vardy, Melanie Bax, Supreeya Wungpatcharapon, Gareth Abrahams.

Yara Sharif presentation

Background

- The research looks at everyday spaces and at the interplay of architecture and politics.
- Wanted to be a politician when she was young but realised that to be political through the everyday and architecture is much more powerful.
- Shows map of countries that have been excluded by US politics since 9/11 - it is in fact not just about Palestine but many other countries too.
- Image of recent Gaza destruction: illustrates the urgent need to rethink architecture in the wake of Israeli tactics of occupation that are no longer hidden but are visible - removing buildings and communities from the map.
- For each urbanism of control there is also a tactic of resistance and transgression. A journey that used to take 20 minutes, now takes 4 days.

Research Methods

Text, narrative cards (visual record of thoughts), design intervention, drawing

Finsbury Park

Deals with the prevalent planning attitude of exclusion and separation:

- Was surprised by not seeing any women in the streets - just a flash of a headscarf here and there
- Found invisible meeting points for women and men in the area
- Spoke of the difficulty of gaining acceptance because of cultural/religious codes such as the wearing of the head scarf and found distrust of the authorities in the women who thought she may be trying spying on them

Invisible Chair

As a way of finding out more, asked people what they would draw on a chair if they were using invisible ink and knew that no one could see it. A little girl drew the story of the lack of trust the

older women had in Yara and their fear of the authorities. An older woman suffering from diabetes brought out sweets that she wanted to eat on the 'invisible chair'.

Invisibility was thus a form of empowerment for these women.

Eventually made friends with the younger girls in the group and with them defined 'invisible sites' in the area, places where they could be without fear of being seen and noticed by others. These were taken further and became sites for various projects.

These projects thus came about through mapping the everyday of the women in Finsbury Park.

Claiming the side walks and the margins

Decided to map the everyday and the spaces of the men in Finsbury Park too:

- When Finsbury Park mosque was shut down by the authorities, all social duties of the mosque also moved to the street, not just the praying - the street becomes the living room
- At praying times, the shops were left half-open because people knew that others across the street or next door would look after them
- At certain times, because of police pressure and harassment, people worked together and created chaos in the street to distract them - chaos was used tactically
- Massive police raid in the area apparently for stolen mobile phones resulted in people being arrested, being made to wear bracelets on their ankles for tracking and resulted in no more than 3 people being allowed to gather in the street at any one time

From the mappings:

- Realised that they were using void spaces
- Individual acts were becoming collective acts due to circumstances
- REFS: K. Dovey and A. Bayat

Silent Mosque

Used the restriction imposed by the police to not allow more than 3 people in public space at any one time as a starting point:

- Mapped the shops that were the most active in the area and that acted as important points
- Used narrative cards to tell of legends of the area or to convey messages, for example a young man is looking to track down his father whom he has not seen for a long time and since he does not know Arabic has found it difficult to find him.
- Project: uses the linked terraces on the first storey of the shops to create a 'silent mosque', since only 3 people are on each terrace, it is possible to pray as a group (as you would in a mosque) without breaking the law.
- Organised a food festival in the area to heal the rifts caused by the police raid and to try to bring back a sense of community.

Palestine

Borders are solidified, people lose their claim to the line:

- Maps the borders over time: between the original line of the West Bank and the wall that Israel is building, there is a no man's land, a kind of void that is also a 'space of opportunity'.
- Starts with social mapping - of her and her colleague's walk to work
- Looks at people's creative ways of using space e.g. car boot is used as a cafe.
- Maps how the different routes have changed over the years

Mobility/Chaos

Used as a form of power, as it was in Finsbury Park:

- Street vendors and the centre of the city swap places as the situation changes, the centre moves outwards and the vendors move inwards.
- A woman gave birth at a checkpoint and a new village sprung up there - it is now named after the boy, Hassan's village.
- Sidewalks are used as shops
- There is lots of waiting, going through checkpoints, waiting for crossings to open - this can also be seen as an opportunity

Night Silence and invisibility

- Tunnels are used for crossing the wall between Gaza and Egypt. There are now VIP tunnels as well, with higher ceilings, sitting areas, living rooms and ventilation.
- Invisible networks of yellow van cars: for £200 you can buy a stolen car and can use it as a taxi service
- Bluetooth and mobiles are used to communicate, because the border is so fluid and near it only highly expensive Israeli mobile company signals are available, people use bluetooth to communicate (means you do not give your money to the other side). When you want to communicate, turn on bluetooth with, 'name-Palestine' and others can find you.

Counter strategy - Redraw the map

Counter strategies gleaned from the everyday mapping include connecting people, adaptation, subversiveness; for example:

- Near the wall at Ramallah, the only structure that is allowed is a crane - so wonders about using cranes to build a city.
- The way the street vendors work and deploy themselves
- The bluetooth network
- Using voids

- How refugee camps function

All these tactics used to make the strategy of 'Urban Bridging'.

Chosen site: Area B, designated as an area where Palestinians are allowed to live but cannot build - this is on going work.

RIWAQ - Centre for Architectural Conservation

Project carried out whilst working with RIWAQ - their aim is to conserve Palestinian historic centres as Israel has a policy of demolishing buildings and stealing materials.

- Site: Birzeit village - to regenerate through the everyday
- RIWAQ as an organisation have the money but not the time to carry out conservation in dialogue with the community so they do preventive conservation and leave.
- They negotiated a one week project of social mapping of the area. In the beginning they concentrated only on the historic area and not the large slum area next to it but realised later (through carrying out the initial social mapping) that this was the most active and important area.
- Example: boy made a bicycle repair shop in a shack next to one of the historic buildings, without doing the social mapping they would not have known of its importance and it would have been cleared.
- From this came the '50 villages' project, which will carry out this kind of mapping in 50 villages and will show Palestine in view of these villages rather than the borders and walls erected by Israel.

Feels there is a tension in the work between the need for 'direct action' but the usefulness of 'subversive action'. Israel is of course being very direct now but feels that if she adopts a similar attitude, she will be rejected.

Discussion

DP: The possibility of creativity within a conflict situation is also something that Ruth Morrow is really interested in. Used to teach in Sheffield and is now in Belfast. This is also true of Yara's work.

NA: Do you think there is a role of direct action in your work?

YS: There is a need for both. Being in Palestine makes you very angry but anger does not achieve very much, need to channel it.

SV: Maybe it is better to speak of visible and invisible rather than direct and indirect but this is very specific to the context.

DP: It is very interesting to see this conflict from the view of Palestinians living there. You do not normally see this. For example the work of Weizman et al. subverts through reproducing and mimicking the power whereas Yara's work has a different approach. It cuts the power by not engaging in the same logic.

YS: Yes, the work of Eyal Weizman and others is always about Israel, about Israeli actions. I wanted to look at Palestine but this is harder because it is invisible and dangerous.

DP: Yes, you put yourself in danger by simply being there. Try to find ways of refusing the power and the violence and work within a different logic.

YS: Yes, you develop tactics. I have a note from my mother, who is a gynaecologist - it says that I am pregnant because and need to cross to Jerusalem for a check-up. This was the only way to cross the border during the war.

DP: Lies and objects become devices for negotiating.

YS: The map of the bluetooth network is also tactical, it maps meeting places and is a map of 'traces'. I wanted to also think about what would happen after the occupation - the crane structures, bluetooth etc. are about thinking about what would happen next.

DP: Yes, the role of the architect is also to envision another world - a different world.