Architecture of Resistance
Cultivating Moments of Possibility within the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict

By Yara Sharif
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"I became no longer able to live with the subtle acceptance of the 'norm' that existed. I needed to zoom out in search of a breathing space beyond the constraints of the Israeli occupation. I needed to search for a broader narrative where everyday life would be bigger than the city of Ramallah, where adventures might involve more than journeys across checkpoints, and where dreams could go beyond merely those of sneaking into Jerusalem (which, after all, is only 15 minutes away from my family home)."

Architecture of Resistance marks the start of Yara Sharif’s journey as a Palestinian female architect as she tries to define her role and shape her identity and self. It is a collection of the various thoughts and ideas provoked by her own journeys and narratives when she lived and worked in Palestine, and which were later transformed into projects that she realized as she set up her practice.

The book is a spatial exploration that looks at the spaces between people, boundary lines, documents, and maps in a search for the meaning of an architecture of resistance. Nourishing not only physical space but also the space of the imagination, Architecture of Resistance lies between dream and reality while combining live and speculative ideas. Sharif reinterprets the land from a new perspective, by stripping it of the dominant power of lines to expose the hidden dynamic topography born of everyday Palestine. The sense of invisibility and subversion that comes with an ordinary life of survival under occupation, time, and immobility, as well as the sheer sense of chaos that this brings with it, form exactly what this book is about.

The author builds on her life and experience in order to explore spatial possibilities that exist in the little details and small spaces of everyday survival and resistance. She argues that there is a degree of irony and power that lies within Palestinians that can subvert spaces of oppression such that they are changed into spaces of play and creativity in which social life can be recuperated. This hidden dynamic topography, born out of the extreme political conditions in Palestine, may help to draw the lines for what could be seen as the counter map of resistance that Edward Said has always called for. “In the history of colonial invasion, maps are always first drawn by the victors, since maps are instruments of conquest. Geography is therefore the art of war but can also be the art of resistance if there is a counter-map and a counter-strategy.” Edward Said, 1994

The book applies a hybrid approach of research through design and visual documentary, using text, personal narratives, illustrations, mapping techniques, and collages to capture the absent local narrative as an essential component of spatial investigation. It is illustrated by three key chapters that define the author’s way of reading and redrawing the landscape; surface, air, and underground. On the surface, she uses the revitalization of the historical center of Birzeit as a way to explore spatial possibilities inspired by daily life. On the other hand, the “Underground” and “Air” chapters offer a tactical critique of the current strategies of Israeli occupation and indeed a sort of ironic and subversive form of reclamation. These two highly speculative design chapters emphasize the need to step above and underneath the exhausted surface of Palestine to look for possibilities. Both chapters share Henri Lefebvre’s quest for a counter-space and re-imagine the “play and creativity” of the ordinary while inhabiting and recasting space.

As the author explains “It is a fragment of an ongoing process of research by design to provoke a critical form of architectural thinking in Palestine.”

About the Author
Yara Sharif is a practicing architect and an academic with an interest in design as a means to facilitate and empower “forgotten communities,” while also interrogating the relationship between politics and architecture.

Combining research with design, her work runs parallel to the architecture practice NG Architects, London – an award-winning practice that has developed a reputation for its work on sustainable community projects, with specific interest in issues of cultural identity and responsive design – and the design studio at the University of Westminster. Sharif co-founded Palestine Regeneration Team (PART), a design-led research group that aims to search for creative and responsive spatial practices in Palestine. Her work on Palestine was granted the prestigious 2013 and 2016 Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) President’s Award for Research.