

Architecture as Development Aid in the Palestinian Territories

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Methodology

This proposal is based on the data of four architectural projects. The respective architects involve different aspects of development aid in the very special region of the Palestinian Territories.

The chosen projects are quite different in concept ranging from academic research and design-studios to pilot projects for official development aid to projects in the NGO sector. In addition each serves a different function.

The projects are:

1. A housing project with around 150 apartments,
2. A water project consisting of 13 water shops where drinking water can be purchased,
3. A master plan for the city centre of Nablus.
4. A rebuilding program for demolished houses.

This study focuses on the development process of each: Starting with the political context, looking at initiation, planning implementation and finally to utilisation and eventual changes, adaptations or damages.

What all the projects have in common is that they each seek a long-term improvement in a certain town or village. Emergency assistance, like the building of refugee camps, is not part of the research.

I am from Austria so here it is relatively easy to get access to information about the majority of the projects in this analysis, i.e.: the ones that are part of official development aid programs or are financed by the Austrian government. One project placed in the NGO-sector and a very important part of my direct experience in the Palestinian Territories was my personal participation in a house-rebuilding project run by an NGO focused on the issue of house demolitions in the West Bank.

Personally visiting some of the sites and meeting the Palestinian professionals working in this field has turned out to be very difficult. Communication often was limited to e-mail. Therefore the research has a perspective from the outside and may at-times lack the Palestinian perspective on certain questions.

Analysis

In the analysis the following questions will be posed:

1. What were the initial aims and concepts?
2. What were the conditions defined by the Palestinian Authority and its institutions?
3. Who were the parties involved during different stages of the projects?
4. Who were the projects planned for and who profited from the implementation?

5. How did the projects develop – what was changed and adapted, what was destroyed or abandoned?
6. Are they still serviced and supervised by their initiators (e.g. the Austrian Development Agency)?
7. What was their political context (also meant as policy concerning development aid)?

A short introduction on the political context in the Palestinian Territories will be followed by a description of the planning conditions of the projects under analysis and their dynamics. As the thesis is in process not every project is in the same stage of research, final conclusions will therefore be forthcoming.

Development aid in the Palestinian Territories

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank are regions that receive among the highest rates per capita of official development aid in the world. As a consequence, a high number of architectural and urban projects can be found within a very small area. This is especially true in Gaza, which has a size of less than 370 km² and a population of more than 1.5 Million. Many buildings were financed by foreign governments and many designed by foreign architects. Also regional plans and master plans have been worked out with international cooperation.

Most of these projects, consisting of regional and local plans, road construction and other infrastructure projects, hospitals, schools, cultural buildings and housing projects, were initiated between 1994 and 2000, as a consequence of the euphoric atmosphere during the Oslo peace process. During the first conferences of the peace process in the 1990's many governments promised to support the economic development of the Palestinian Territories, which had a large effect on urban development.

Unfortunately they could hardly help to improve the inhabitant's lives. One reason is the complex political situation – many buildings have never been completed others were destroyed or damaged by the IDF (Israeli Defence Force). In other cases the concepts seem questionable, as they are not appropriate to meet people's needs. For example: in Gaza high-rise buildings that were constructed without regard to local building codes and practices for natural ventilation do not take advantage of the local Mediterranean winds, and block the natural ventilation of the town. Some are built against town-planning principles on sites with a high risk of military attacks. Despite the extreme shortage of housing stock, many apartments have remained empty, among other reasons as they were planned for a middle class that in fact could and did not develop as expected.

The Planning Context

Since such a large number of institutions from various donor nations decided to finance projects at the same time, the coordination of these different interventions was difficult. This lack of coordination is obvious when comparing development plans of different scales or content, for example the plans for the Ministry of Housing where not coordinated at all with the regional plans produced by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC). (Schindler, Ballhausen, 1999)

In general, there is no clear program that could direct donations into a viable overall concept – hardly any town in the territories had any kind of an urban development plan, there is a lack of data of land ownership (Many property deeds date back to the Ottoman Empire) and there

is no tradition of the state providing apartments such as the housing projects that were financed through (international) aid programs.

Today, since the beginning of the Second Intifada and the current bombing of Gaza by Israel and the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, the positive atmosphere of the beginning of the Oslo peace process is totally gone. Compared to the restrictions due to the occupation by Israel, every other factor influencing urban development seems negligible. Thousands of Palestinian houses have been demolished by Israeli bulldozers, the separation wall (referred to by Palestinians as apartheid wall and by Israelis as separation or security fence) which is creating Palestinian enclaves, is progressing. In Gaza – which is officially not occupied any longer - only the most necessary goods are allowed to pass the border and sometimes the border is closed completely. The Gaza strip has almost no industry or natural resources so most things are imported from Israel, and though this is an advantage for the Israeli economy, it represents a grave hardship for the Palestinians in Gaza.

Since the situation in the West Bank and Gaza has continued to deteriorate during recent years, aid policies have changed accordingly. Now, emergency assistance is a necessity. During the 1990's various countries, Austria for example, had financed architectural or urban projects as part of their aid program. Currently they are not planning to do so any more. Instead, it is providing emergency aid focusing mainly on medical assistance and water projects. Per year, Austrian official development aid for the Palestinian Territories is around €3 Million.

Building projects financed by the Austrian government between 1995 and 2000

Project 1: Water shops in Deir al Balah as part of a seawater-treatment-plant, 1996-2003, (costs: around €4 Million.)

Maintaining a reliable water supply for the fast growing Palestinian population has been an increasing problem. Addressing the problem with a desalination plant was already decided by 1996.

Before implementation, several academic institutes were involved to study the topic. Ideally, research work for problems like this should be started prior to choosing the main concept or budget. Sufficient time must be taken to frame such a complex situation; the project should not be reduced on a technical level too early. Consequences of the project's implementation should be clear so the project is not counter-productive to its goals. Possible consequences are: Examples of water projects in developing countries show that sites became so expensive in slums where water infrastructure was built that people could not afford to move there. Water produced by desalination in a poverty stricken area may become more expensive than the previous source and hence hard to afford for the served population. Producing large amounts of water with energy intensive treatment plants in Gaza might support the Palestinian population's water needs but might make the comparative over consumption by Israel less visible. (Jung, 2003)

Because of over pumping from the aquifer under the Gaza area, the water produced has become increasingly salty. In Deir al-Balah many residents (especially the poorest groups) were using this increasingly saline tap water. The construction of the seawater treatment plant with 13 water shops, with water for purchase, spread throughout the city, was thought

to provide a solution to this situation. Though a water shop would only be a simple kiosk, in Deir al-Balah more emphasis than usual was given to the design of the shops as the public interface to the project. The Department for urban planning of the Vienna University of Technology was responsible for the design. Part of the design development process was a series of several short seminars in Vienna and Aachen, where principals and consequences were discussed. Proposals were made as to where to position the shops in the town and what other functions the shops could serve. One of the principles was that the shop should be built by local firms and as far as possible with local materials, even though it would have been much easier just to import the whole box and place it on the site. In the end, however, most materials had to be imported and the majority of the components were produced in Israel.

An unintended result of the project was that the inhabitants thought the project would make them pay for water that they previously had obtained for free, although arguably of better quality. Unfortunately, since the project's implementation was delayed due to the difficult political situation, other drinking water providers, selling water obtained from the already overtaxed common wells worsened the water situation. A campaign to promote the water from the more ecological and healthy seawater-treatment plant was considered, but not ultimately implemented. These unforeseen events led to the fact that in the end many people bought water from other providers.

Though efforts were made to keep the project adaptable (e.g. the shops were designed to be moved easily from place to place) initially it did not seem to be very successful: it was completed but not all of the shops were available for use. The project was given over to the Palestinian Water Authority. The money currently paid by consumers for the water is not enough to run the plant, the price for the water is not higher than what other providers charge since the project is financed by the World Bank. During the recent situation in the Gaza Strip in July of 2006, the project experienced a revival when the main Gaza power station was blown up and a large part of the electricity supply was eliminated. The water supply suddenly became much less because electric pumps would not work. This increased demand for water from desalinization units, with their independent power supplies. Overall, water from desalinization was increased.

Project 2: the *Austrian Housing Project* in Khan Younis 1993-1999,
(costs: around €3 Million.)

The *Austrian Housing Project* is a building built in cooperation between the "Bundeskanzleramt" of Austria and the Palestinian Ministry of Housing. The project was designed to address the shortage of housing in the Palestinian Territories by financing 300 apartments. In a process similar to that of the water-treatment plant project, a great deal of planning took place before any experts were involved. The project goes back to the preparatory conferences of Oslo Peace Treaty in 1993. Other forms of housing sector aid (e.g. loans to low income families for home building) were not taken into account. Two housing projects were financed: one in Nablus in the West Bank and one in Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip.

Like many other housing projects financed by foreign governments at the time the units were built to provide apartments for middle-income civil servants. For example, several hundred apartments in multi-story towers were financed by the Japanese government in a town in the northern part of the Gaza Strip for people working for the police and their families. (A large

number of civil servants have jobs in the police.) The Austrian apartments were meant to be sold with a subsidised loans to teachers and nurses, professions with the most “social” reputation. During the peace process there was a great deal of job growth in government and other institutions. As a result, many Palestinians came back from other countries to work in the Palestinian Territories. Similar to other housing activities of governments around the world they were also meant to secure the support of their tenants for the Palestinian Authority. Most of the buildings are multi-story apartment blocks similar to housing projects in Europe during the 60’s. An important difference is that Palestinian extended families are much larger (up to 30 people) thus, the size of an apartment is usually around 100 square meters.

The Ministry of Housing had clear ideas of how the buildings should look. This left almost no space for alternative housing project ideas. The Austrian architect Johannes Fiedler who had previous experience working in Palestinian refugee camps, assisted the Ministry of Housing staff as a consultant. This meant that he was not the designer of the project (drawing the plans) but rather visited the architects of the Ministry approximately every six weeks to monitor the project. In the end the design was a compromise of the proposal of the Ministry and Fiedler’s ideas. The project in Khan Younis consists of ten 5-story blocks surrounding 3 courtyards, a height that residents can manage without an elevator. (Fiedler, 2000) Additional funds were available to build two additional building blocks. The blocks were started but never finished, of one of them only the foundation has been completed.

The building site of the project in Khan Younis has borders on a refugee camp and the development area of a former Israeli settlement. It is not too far from the city centre. When the houses were originally built the site was close to an Israeli settlement and thus the risk for attacks was high. Indeed, one of the blocks was demolished completely during an attack by the IDF. In addition several apartments were also damaged. In cooperation with UNDP the Austrian Development Agency is renovating the damaged apartments, but the destroyed block will not be rebuilt and the additional blocks will not be completed – at least not in the near future. Since January 2006 it is has not been possible to continue the work as building materials have not been allowed to transit the border. Since July 2006 the Gaza Strip has again become a war zone and any assistance is extremely difficult. Another problem is that many upper floors of multi-storey buildings remain vacant because people refuse to live n the upper stories. Also the public space between the huge buildings is usually of poor quality and much of it is lost for parking lots. Despite all the problems described above this project can be seen as a rather positive example compared to many other housing projects built in the Oslo era.

As so many apartment buildings (not only those built by donor states but also those by private investors) were built in a very short time, the number of people who applied for an apartment in the Austrian Housing Project was not very high. However, all the apartments were sold. Also, housing projects built exclusively for a certain group (i.e.: teachers or nurses) may not provide support for the people who need housing most. Instead this could potentially increase inequality within society. Additionally, among Palestinians, it is a rather new concept for people who are not related to each other to live in one house. As a result, many multi-storey buildings were purchased by wealthy families who are renting them to their relatives.

In the current climate in Israel and also in the Palestinian Territories, the construction of buildings is used as a device to define borders and to secure the possession of land. This makes the location very important. That is why many housing projects were built on sites close to Israeli settlements, which were part of Israel's process for occupation in the Gaza Strip and that are still one of the main issues in the West Bank. On such sites it is usually much more difficult to implement infrastructure as they often are located in a peripheral location. Building is not merely providing houses but has become a very political issue – either as a form of occupation or resistance. Finally, no matter how well designed a housing project is, as long as one's apartment is positioned in the front line of a possible military attack, a decent living quality can never be achieved.

Project 3: Master plan for the historic centre of Nablus 1997-2002

Development aid is not always merely assistance to cover basic needs such as housing or water supply. This project's aim was to create a concept for the preservation, improvement and adaptation of the historic centre of Nablus. It was designed to aid the Municipality in its efforts to protect the cultural heritage as well as the living conditions of its residents. (Hasso Hohmann, Grigor Doytchinov, 2001). A very short time after the last details were discussed in Nablus and the master plan was finished, the Second Intifada started. In April of 2002 many buildings were destroyed by the Israeli Defence Force.

Certainly the current situation in Israel makes the existence of the research even more important. To determine when a renovation process for the cultural heritage can finally be started, on the other hand, again in light of the current situation, it is not very likely that the aims of the master plan can be reached any time soon.

An example of a building project in the NGO sector:

The 4th international Workshop organised by the *Israeli Committee against House Demolitions* (ICAHD), July 2006

In the Palestinian Territories a large number of NGO's working in various fields are demonstrating their solidarity with the Palestinian people. Their work in the field related to architecture and urban planning can be defined as "planning and activism" or "building as activism". This includes assistance in rebuilding destroyed houses, consulting in planning issues, activism against house demolitions or activism against the construction of the security barrier in the West Bank. Whereas some human right groups are strictly against material aid (aid consisting of something tangible) such as building projects, others find it very important to leave tangible signs and facts on the ground.

ICAHD is an NGO that is focused on the issue of house demolition. It is helping Palestinian families whose houses were demolished because they could not obtain a building permit to build or rebuild their homes. In a large portion of the Palestinian Territories, Israel is in charge of zoning and planning. In many towns and villages it is only possible to get a permit in already built-up areas. Generally in these areas there are few empty sites left and the price for land is very high. Outside these areas people seldom are able, despite repeated efforts applying for permits, and expensive application fees, to obtain permits to build, even for building on land they own. In frustration, many of them choose to build illegally. Many do not apply at all, knowing how unlikely it will be they will obtain the needed permit. Houses

built without a permit may be demolished by the Israeli “civil administration”, this could happen after a few days, several weeks, a couple of years or never. In the region surrounding Jerusalem, the planning policy goes along with the goal of maintaining a strong Jewish majority in the area, as this is territory Israel hopes eventually to annex. As a form of resistance against these unjust policies, a part of ICAHD’s work is to organize work camps where international volunteers assist Palestinian professionals to rebuild the home of a family, which was recently demolished. The chosen families are among those extraordinary affected by the policy of house demolitions and also ready to take the risk to build another “illegal” home, that might be bulldozed again.

The fourth such rebuilding camp took place in July 2006. All the camps to date have taken place in Anata, a town in East Jerusalem, bordering Israeli West Jerusalem. Anata is a place where several issues of the conflict can be directly witnessed, especially those related to architecture and city development: It is surrounded by a refugee camp, a military base and several disputed Jewish settlements. The separation wall and a by-pass road next to it are under construction nearby.

The idea of thirty people, most of whom have taken long distance flights just to spend two weeks in Anata to rebuild, might sound absurd, considering how much energy is needed just to build a single house. At this time however, in the Palestinian Territories, many such international groups are working to help the people, all doing things that could be thought of as extraordinary.

The ICAHD organisation is not part of the design process of the houses to be rebuilt; they are built in a similar manner as the original demolished house on the same site. They are often smaller because of budget limitations, and don’t have the limestone façade that many houses in the region have. The workers are local professionals, but most of the materials have to be imported from Israel. A problem intrinsic to the process is that the time for building the whole house is restricted to two weeks. This might not be enough for the concrete to dry. Despite this, all of the programs to date have been finished in two weeks.

The program is not only about providing a home for a family, but about building as an act of solidarity and resistance in a severely endangered territory. The rebuilding is an illegal act according to Israeli law. However, the presence of internationals may serve to increase the security on the site should the army or the police become aware of or interfere with the project. The workshop is enriched by excursions and talks to give the participants a detailed picture of the conflict and empower them to do advocacy in their home countries.

Conclusions

Development aid is seen as a sector of overall aid that should create possibilities for projects that have a positive effect of people’s lives in deprived regions and conflict areas. At the same time it is a very sensitive field, as relief projects always interact with local civil procedures and social customs. Projects run the risk of creating new dependencies. In other cases, groups that are less supported or served might feel discriminated against.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict such architectural projects are very often political statements of solidarity with the Palestinians, resistance to occupation or supporting the current political power structure (Palestinian Authority providing apartments for civil

servants), When architecture is chosen as a mean to express solidarity, it might not only be to serve needs like housing or infrastructure but also to be visible as an example. It is easy to overlook efforts made to improve women's empowerment or education, but everyone in a neighbourhood will notice when huge apartment blocks are built nearby. They are also often then used photo opportunities for politicians to present themselves to the media.

In general, architecture as development aid should not be overestimated. It cannot prevent injustice by itself. It can however be a small but important step for a limited group of people towards more equality. What makes the Palestinian Territories such an interesting region in terms of development aid and international assistance is the amount of energy that is concentrated on this very small region. Unfortunately, a large part of this energy and effort is lost due to the complicated situation. Problems that occur include: building materials not passing the borders, professionals not allowed to travel to meetings, planners lacking information such as aerial views they are not allowed to have because of security reasons, money lost due to corruption and the fact that any implementation is in danger of being demolished as a result of parts of the region are still being in a war zone.

Since the election of Hamas to the Palestinian legislative Council it is hard to say how the cooperation with the Palestinian Territories will be continued. Many donor nations are not willing to support the government or are reluctant to defy EU and US boycotts of the region. With the current "convergence" plan (now on hold) to withdraw from the West Bank except for the large settlements, to complete the "security barrier" and to make it the border encircling non-contiguous Palestinian enclaves, a viable Palestinian state seems to be far away. Under such conditions it becomes harder and harder to continue work. As the work is so inefficient it becomes harder to justify (why should tax-payers want to support development aid when the projects are so likely to fail or be destroyed?). But as the example of the water-treatment plant shows, a project that was not successful became suddenly necessary when the situation changed.

Although there is not a high chance to implement projects now, the work on development scenarios can be continued, in order to have programs ready when the situation improves. What urban planners can also do is use their tools of urban and regional planning to inform the public that Israel's zoning and planning policy can not be justified by security reasons and that they do not go along with established town-planning principles. They can show that the policy has resulted in much destruction and suffering. Although much effort has already been made to do this without noticeable results, this is still urgently needed. It would be worth the effort as well to continue to try to find some way of negotiation and cooperation with Israel to try to solve these problems despite the current atmosphere of mutual distrust.

What would be very valuable, especially in the field of architecture, is to make the Palestinian economy less dependent on Israel. The use of local building materials could make building projects much more sustainable and could integrate more people in the projects. (Limestone is only one example of natural resources available in the West Bank). But the increase of use of local materials depends a lot on the borders within the West Bank created by the separation wall. Maybe also the reuse of rubble – that is available everywhere - could be improved. In complex issues such as the development of Jerusalem, which has large number of both Palestinian and Israeli residents, the involvement of international professionals might also serve as a tool for mediation between opposing parties.

In conclusion, a lot of work has been done, but there is a lot of work still to do to improve the coordination and the communication between Palestinian and international institutions, between Palestinian and Israeli institutions as well as among the institutions of donor nations.

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