DECOLONIZING ARCHITECTURE (DAAR)

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IN CONVERSATION WITH OKWI ENWEZOR

Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR)

DAAR is an art and architecture collective and a residency programme based in Beit Sahour, Palestine. DAAR's work combines discourse, spatial intervention, education, collective learning, public meetings and legal challenges. DAAR's practice is centred on one of the most difficult dilemmas of political practice: how to act both propositionally and critically within an environment in which the political force field is so dramatically distorted. It proposes the subversion, reuse, profanation and recycling of the existing infrastructure of a colonial occupation. DAAR projects have been shown showed in various biennales and museums, among the others the Venice Biennale, Bozar, Brussels, NGBK Berlin, the Istanbul Biennial, Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, Home Works, Beirut, Architekturforum Tirol, Innsbruck, the Oslo Triennial, and the Centre Pompidou, Paris. DAAR's members have lectured internationally including Columbia University, New York, Tate Modern, London, Global Art Forum, Dubai, the Edward Said Memorial Lecture, University of Warwick, Al Feneiq Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Bethlehem, and The Human Rights Project (Bard Collage). In 2010 it was awarded the Price Claus Prize for Architecture and shortlisted for the Chrnikov Prize.
www.decolonizing.ps

Okwi Enwezor: Alessandro, Sandi and Eyal, I would like to begin with an initial enquiry into your conception of decolonisation, which strikes me as paradoxical on the one hand, and curious on the other. In the first instance, it appears paradoxical to want to decolonise Palestinian architecture, that is, if we take on board the historical argument that the architectures of the landscape of Israel and Palestine have always been commingled to the extent that it seems impossible to disentangle their individual, unique structural languages. If my assumption bears any relation to the facts of spatial practice in the area, what in your view constitutes colonial architecture into which Decolonizing Architecture aims to intervene? I am also curious about the apologetic tone you adopt in the usage of the term decolonisation, which you deem to be problematic and fraught with historical problems. Might it be possible to elaborate on what makes 'decolonisation' problematic in the contemporary context?

DAAR: Nice to be in conversation with you, Okwi. In order to engage with your challenges, we'd like to trace a trajectory of the terms you are enquiring about, and then deal with the ways in which these have become operative concepts in our work.

In the introduction to the first Hebrew edition of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, Ella Shohat commented on the 'inverse way' in which post-colonial literature entered Palestinian-Israeli discourse. In the early 1990s, several articles by Gayatri Spivak were translated into Hebrew. These were followed by the work of Homi Bhabha, and, much later, by that of Edward Said. Finally, it was only at the start of the recent intifada that translations of Frantz Fanon became available. It was a shorthand critique for the ways in which the academic environment of the Oslo years engaged with a robust post-colonial discourse, yet one that did not rest on anti-colonial struggles. Translated into Arabic, though, Fanon's book was often found on the bodies of PFLP fighters throughout the 1970s.

However, we do seem to be living through a kind of post-colonial colonisation. On the one hand, the discourse of the
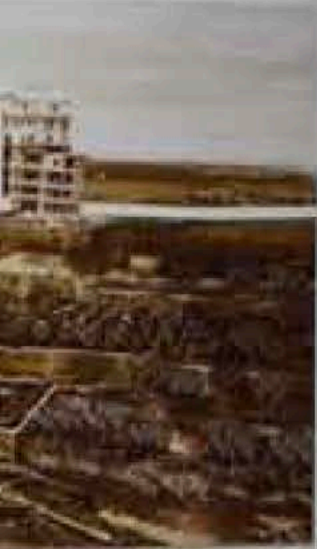
1990s was saturated with terms such as proximity, hybridity, neighbourliness, without sufficiently engaging with the colonial reality of Zionism, or with what Derek Gregory called "the colonial present". On the other hand, the type of control held by the Palestinian Authority simulates a kind of quasi-state attitude, all the while being under Israeli control. It is also apparent that the present technologies of domination are themselves post-structural, networked and multilayered more than ever before. What we are dealing with is not only blatant exclusion and separation, but a regime that madly juxtaposes freedom and domination, autonomy and control, law and lawlessness, access and separation, liberalism and occupation. In this mischung, there is a central place for liberal technologies of moderation – humanitarianism, international law, human rights – to become abused forms of government/governance. In the West Bank, apparatuses from industrial zones through to the flow-modulation of checkpoints, and the path of the wall, are physically engineered according to the proportionality mechanism, in which 'well-being' is part of the logic of control. As such, it is meaningful to insist on colonization as the frame of reference, and on the term decolonisation as the necessary practice. There is nothing apologetic in our treatment of the term decolonisation. In fact, we've used it so unashamedly that it has become the name of our studio! But we do think that it needs to be updated in so far as contemporary colonial practices are different from those of the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, our ultimate aim is to learn to do other things with what we call "the future archaeology of colonization".

OE: What seems to be missing, however, is what I consider precisely to be the several registers of address that bear directly on the notion of spatial practice: namely terms such as distance, proximity, neighbourliness. How does a critical architectural programme, whether pragmatic or speculative, invent a new lexicon for dwelling next to, or theories of adjacency, to deal with the unspeakable other, be they Palestinian or Israeli?

DAAR: Aesthetically, in this regard, there is much grey area. Israel began construction work in and around Jerusalem in the second half of 1967. Israeli and international architects rushed to build these occupied parts of Jerusalem, professing a yet-unclear 'return to history', and abandoning abstract, modern practices in exchange for feelings of 'locality and place' – a certain 'dwelling' rather than living. Local, Arab architecture became the main reference for imitation in the framing of Zionist architecture as a so-called local and native practice. On the other hand, many Palestinian buildings reflected a desire for the kind of luxury that appeared in settlement homes. Today, you can see the entirety of a new Arab town (Rawabi, north of Ramallah, for instance) built in very similar fashion to an Israeli settlement. In fact, one of the reasons for this similarity is brutally practical: it was Arab construction workers who built the settlements, keeping the plans and later using them in public and private projects for Palestinians! However, although they may superficially look alike, it is the infrastructure, the networks of transport, the flow of commodities, provisions, water, electricity, gas – in short the invisible networks of power that charge these building with their performative capacity. Thus, it is not so much in the houses themselves, but in the systems that weave them together, that the difference is both made and perceived.

We think that questions of togetherness and the like should be made meaningful through the terms of a joint struggle against a present system of inequality and control. Terms that then become the condition for dealing with the issue of neighbourliness and proximity. The idea of a struggle today has many forms, several of which are based on building institutional frameworks that join pedagogy with activism and architectural work, much as we have tried to do. Amira Hass has suggested that these joint platforms – set up to fight the injustice of colonisation – will become the political platforms of the future. It is not by chance that our practice is based in Beit-Sahour, which has been and still is a nodal point for several left-wing political movements and practices.