

Forensic Architecture: An Interview with Eyal Weizman

Yates McKee and Meg McLagan

YATES MCKEE: We would like to start by asking you to talk about the broader trajectory of your career. You first gained prominence in the architectural field when the exhibition you cocurated, *A Civilian Occupation*, was withdrawn as the submission by the Israeli Architecture Association to the 2002 International Union of Architects Congress in Berlin. You were trained professionally as an architect and had a practice, but already in 2002 you were operating in relation to political and human rights activism. How did that come about?

EYAL WEIZMAN: I studied architecture at the Architecture Association School of Architecture in London and in 1996 spent my “year out” working in Tel Aviv. I wanted to volunteer for work at the Palestinian Ministry of Planning. It was the Oslo years, only a few months after [Prime Minister Yitzhak] Rabin was assassinated. The Ministry of Planning was on the seam between north Jerusalem and south Ramallah. I volunteered as a planner, but there was not much to do. The offices had large contingents of Norwegians who felt, I assume, responsible for the agreement that bore the name of their capital. I was doing all sorts of planning-assistant tasks, such as hand-rendering plans and so on, when at some point, the planners thought of a better use of my time. As an Israeli, I had access to cartographic information that was not otherwise made available to the Palestinians. In the innocence of the pre-Google Earth years, aerial and satellite imagery and maps had to be obtained at state cadastral offices, to which Israel did not provide access for Palestinians. This withholding of maps was a de facto policy.

What we had at the ministry were Russian—I think KGB-compiled—maps of the area. They were quite good topographically, but the built environment they represented was a state long gone. The settlements, for example, were simply added as dots on the map. I was sent out on “missions” to libraries and the

cadastral office to obtain maps; I was a combination low-level industrial espionage agent and copyboy: photocopying maps and bringing them back to the ministry in Ramallah.

MM: So they were readily available in libraries and other places?

EW: Yes, I should therefore not overstate the importance of what I was doing. It was really about bringing maps that were available to any Israeli with a student card. It allowed the ministry to update all sorts of data, and it taught me the significance of maps; it also started a long relationship with Palestinian planners and architects. These connections became the skeleton on which I would place my later work. At the time, working in Ramallah for the ministry was relatively easy—it might have not been legal, but it wasn't criminalized. Being in Palestinian-controlled areas and in touch with Palestinian institutions became illegal for Israelis only after the second intifada began in 2000.

YM: Did you continue to work for the Planning Ministry after 1996?

EW: There were frequent exchanges. I came back to meetings later when I worked with B'tselem—the human rights center dealing with the Occupied Territories. Some Palestinian NGOs, such as ARIJ, the Applied Research Institute–Jerusalem, were doing some good mappings and we were exchanging aerial and satellite data, whatever we had. In the early 2000s, B'tselem was receiving some satellite information from the American consulate, which was implicitly and explicitly supporting NGOs in Israel and Palestine. There's a department in the Pentagon that is in charge of geography and general statistical data; we supposed that the United States had an interest in monitoring the growth of the settlements. From them we were getting fresh satellite images that were not yet available to the public. Different people and organizations had vested interests in compiling maps and making them public, and this was reflected in the way they were doing cartography. But when we compiled the map from master plans and from some photographs from the ground and air, we were following our own agenda.

At the center of these projects was the West Bank, a territory violently reshaped by conflict. It is in reality a beautiful, fragile, and shrinking piece of landscape, almost extinct. A good account of this is given by Raja Shehadeh in his book *Palestinian Walks*.¹ This fragile landscape has gradually turned into something I understand as the “political plastic”—a territorial arrangement that is continuously shaped and reshaped by political forces. If you look at it closely, you can notice that it registers the forces that act upon it. In this conflict, or in territorial conflicts in general, you cannot say that politics “happen in space,” but rather that they happen *by* space. Space is not the set of abstract coordinates on which the events

of politics unfold, but something that is transformed and remade by every political action that takes place within it. So I was thinking of politics as something like “space in action” or “space in movement” and of this movement as quite a deadly thing. We can discuss later what this will mean for all sorts of legal challenges and forensic investigations brought in relation to territories and structures. The object never stands in isolation; the evidence is also constantly mutating. It is like conducting an analysis of a living body while it is twisting in pain.

YM: Did you go back to Israel/Palestine after you finished your degree?

EW: I never really left. I was living between the region and different places in Europe at the time and also started my PhD with Mark Cousins and Paul Hirst, who encouraged me to use my work in and on Palestine as the foundation for my doctoral research.

YM: So in 2001, were you contacted by B’Tselem, or did you already know the person there?

EW: I went to B’Tselem to study their archives, and they happened to stumble upon an architect at the moment they were looking for one. Yehezkel Lein, who has since moved to the UN, proposed that we do a report that would be based on an analysis of the built environment. The idea was to shift the language of critique away from one based on Article 48 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which stipulates that an occupying state is forbidden to transfer population to or from an area it occupies. By this principle, any home that would be built even just beyond the Green Line, the border of Israel prior to the 1967 Six-Day War, would be considered illegal. True enough, but this principle was not able to capture the full extent of the planning dimension of violations—the way crimes were contemplated and produced on drawing boards. If you wanted to take issue with architecture and planning, you needed to take critique a step further and give our study a forensic dimension—do spatial forensics.

This started a new phase in our thinking in which we were interested in demonstrating what we started to call the “second order” of a crime: beyond the fact that an action—here, planning and building—was undertaken within a general zone of illegality. We wanted to engage the entire depth of invention, technology, and techniques that go into that planning, query its intentions, unpack its formal and organizational logic, and compare them to a set of legal norms. Ultimately, though it wasn’t impossible at the time, we thought we had to construct a case tight enough to put an architect in the dock. And for this we needed a new type of spatial representation and analysis. By synthesizing all fragments of maps and plans into a single document, we could observe and draw some initial conclusions,

in particular regarding the way in which that planning is employed to cause material damage to Palestinian communities by splintering and fragmenting the logic of their regional economy. We could also show how generic Israeli planning principles, in relation, for example, to the building of a suburb, were paradoxically compromised—which means that planners were creating less convenient built environments for settlers—in order to serve the auxiliary function of this planning in disrupting Palestinian economy. We could see how simple planning irregularities, variations in the proportion of parking lots to housing units, for example, were created because of what the layout of some settlement was asked to do—to draw a long arc that bisects Palestinian towns and villages.

By saying that a settlement was badly designed as a residential community, we were of course not protesting the way settlers were treated, although I do think that the state lured in some of these people and bears the ultimate responsibility. We were protesting what a forensic investigation of planning documents, statistics, and layout revealed: that there were other interests at play and that these folded in larger geopolitical motivations and ultimately violations of international laws. We were trying to read geopolitics in architectural and planning details.

In the frame of criminal courts, there is a potential problem, because they seek individual responsibility. But we had an extensive view of architecture, which we saw not necessarily and not always as a creation of a single author, but as a diagram of a set of forces and power relations, slowing into form. This also meant a conception of architectural crime as one grounded in diffused agency. The courts in which this study could be used were thus those in which state acts, state crimes—rather than individual ones—could be reviewed.

YM: This research was published as a widely circulated online as a PDF report with the title *Land Grab*.² You've mentioned that the map contained in the report actually became the matrix for work by other people with their own data sets and projects, almost like an open-source process.

EW: We saved the PDF document in a way that when it is opened, one can isolate the layers, continue working on the document, and upload it. So mapping the occupation indeed became something of an open-source project, with many participants downloading, updating, and uploading material. But this was done not only by well-meaning activists. The most disturbing thing was when we realized that the army was using this map. Somebody from B'tselem saw it hanging on the wall at the Ministry of Defense, with a sketch of the Wall on it! Indeed, we finished the mapping just as they started their planning.

MM: So the *Land Grab* report largely revolved around the map?

EW: Yes, the report was a way of framing the map in terms of international and human rights law — a forensic reading of architecture and planning. It offered a reading of the built landscape as a product of the interplay of planning decisions and forces on the ground. But the map had a larger effect. It gained autonomy beyond the report and started to be used widely, both locally and internationally. Part of the attractiveness of the map, it was later said, was its “elegance.” It operated simultaneously as a map and as an image. As a map, it could be read for the navigational and relational associations that it established between things on the ground, such as bases, settlements, and villages. As an image, it could be read instantly. It had to communicate a dynamic process of expansion in one look. So there is — broadly speaking — an epistemological and an aesthetic dimension that were entangled in this map/image.

YM: A signature feature is the color gradients.

EW: The color gradient is a tool to make sense of expansion and of an ongoing process. This is what accounted for it being simultaneously a map and an image. Some maps can do that, of course. In fact, ideally, one should have been able to press “play” on this map and see how its ongoing transformation, the political plastic, continued to register and translate political processes into color and form. The map finally looks like camouflage — which is fitting, because camouflage is also an attack on form. The colonial project of the settlement is an attack on political form — on the coherence of Palestinian political space. We insisted on giving this part extra attention, and I remember that some people in B’Tselem did not understand the delay involved in the design of the map as we were endlessly reworking it.

YM: So this was not merely a matter of aesthetic appearance in the superficial sense of the word — the gradients highlight a process of growth and also indicate the dynamics simultaneously at work at various topographical levels, which has been another innovation of your research. However, there were certainly activist mapping techniques in the past, or at least an understanding of the importance of maps, no? In his article in *The New Intifada*, Edward Said talked about how one of the major disadvantages of Palestinian negotiators had been their lack of comprehensive maps.³ Indeed, Said included in that article several maps, but as in your earlier point, they are composed basically of points and lines.

EW: The article, first published in the *London Review of Books* at the end of 2000, was about the violent beginnings of the second intifada. It is an extremely important piece, in fact formative. In it, Said calls for a spatial turn, by which he meant, I think, turning the physical mapping of the conflict into a form of evidence. You know, he wasn’t very fond of the Palestinian Authority, to say the least, certainly

from a certain point on, perhaps after Oslo, and he was particularly furious with the way they conducted negotiations and signed agreements without a mandate and also without being aware of the geography and without having maps of their own. The Israelis, in the meantime, fielded an array of generals and geography experts who managed to create an illusion of a “Palestinian Territories” that was actually nothing but a patchwork of spaces. It was a paradox that Said, who in his writing was one of the strongest critics of mapping as a colonial practice, pointing out the imaginary geography of the colonizers as they are registered in cartography, would himself propose cartographies or countercartographies as one of the forms of resistance.

I think that one can understand this apparent contradiction in terms of the fact that nowadays, contemporary colonialism could no longer afford to conduct its crimes in broad daylight, as it had done in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were not crimes then, because international humanitarian law was in its infancy. Now, colonial occupation needs to create a level of secrecy, covering its traces as it goes along, destroying its evidence, or at least not making the data public for all to see . . . so mapping and all sorts of techniques based on civilianized former military technology started to become a prevalent form of protest. It is strange that it was now human rights people who were conducting reconnaissance flights—we were hiring light planes to do this—or interpreting satellite images and remote sensing technologies as if we were intelligence officers in the RAF. We can discuss the problems associated with that later.

The Said article indeed inspired a generation of activists and researchers, including me. In the following years, the “spatial turn” in the discourse surrounding the occupation has extended our political understanding of the conflict to a physical, geographical reality and has led to the production of a plethora of maps, drawn and distributed by a multiplicity of political and human rights groups. Ours was only one of many.

And yes, mapping requires some rethinking. Maps are interventions in the fields of territorial visibility. This is apparent in the selections of what to show and how to draw it. What do you show and what do you hide? Obviously, showing some of the informal ways in which Palestinians use the terrain or how they bypass checkpoints, as is the case in some ill-informed art-inspired practices of countercartography, can be counterproductive. It’s like revealing a productive secret. On the other hand, being able to choose what to show and how to represent it can challenge the otherwise absolute monopoly of such information by the state, even if the choice is enabled by forms of technology initially provided by the state.

After a while, I returned to thinking about Said’s point about Palestinians not having maps. Maybe there is also another way of thinking about it. The

Palestinians might have used the fact they did not have maps as a negotiation strategy. They could have refused to enter the game of maps and lines altogether. Israelis would say, “We constantly offer you this compromise and that compromise, this or that line, and you have not drawn up a proposal in return; you have not shown us one single map.” But geography could of course be rejected for a set of political principles or political demands, equality or single citizenship, for example. The minute you come in with other maps, you enter a zone of negotiation. In the trials prompted by the construction of the Wall, negotiations about the location of the Wall just ended by creating an arena for the participation of Palestinians in the design of their own means of incarceration. So in this sense, maps are more useful for the documentation of crimes in the past, rather than as proposals for the future. Maps, but not geographical plans! Plans in this conflict should be based on political principles, rather than on geographical solutions.

MM: So at what point did you commit yourself to this work? Can you narrate that for us?

EW: In the early 2000s, I was entering several collaborations in order to fund the research I wanted to do. The art world was rather useful for that. The banning of the *Civilian Occupation* exhibition inadvertently gained publicity for the project. At the time, I was very much in the mind-set of wanting to get the work out using different platforms. The art world provided us a great set of possibilities—it was like a laboratory for thinking about the several dimensions of the work: arenas of discussion and critique, infrastructure, and networks of dissemination that enabled the work to move into all sorts of unexpected forums, including, through this detour and using the media generated, political ones. It led to excellent collaborations.

I also found myself in the middle of an architecture discussion that had already started about politics and urban research, the meaning and methods of research and urban transformation. We did not initially intend the work to be an intervention in the architectural discipline per se, but as it happened, we found ourselves fighting two battles, so to speak, one political-contextual in relation to the area—Palestine—in which we had stakes and the other for architectural research to be considered as a form of architecture, with effects in the world, and this without having to be validated by leading to a design proposal, so this work contributed to a change of sensibility in contemporary architecture as practiced by different people.

YM: The institutions of architecture in the limited sense have been only one site or platform among many others for publicizing and extending this work, but in theoretical terms, a key point you have made is that the occupation is itself thoroughly architectural at many different levels.

EW: Yes, architecture was both the subject of research—we were studying buildings, landscapes, territories—and the methodology of research. We used the toolbox of architectural analysis to enter the political debate in a different way.

MM: How have the conditions for doing this kind of work evolved since you began?

EW: There has been an explosion of mapping that coincided with ours. Specifically, the West Bank must be the most mapped area of the world. Our project was not the first, but it took place at a moment when geography started to matter in a particularly urgent way. This explosion of activities involved the combination of mapping with visual documentation—amateur video and satellite images became much more available. At present, there is an incredible wealth of information around. People are mapping and posting their maps in real time. It seems as if any change in the territory is immediately registered in image and video form.

YM: Could you say something about your relationship with both governmental and nongovernmental actors in Palestine? Do you still work in some capacity with the Planning Ministry?

EW: In the spring of 2005, when the Israeli settlements were being evacuated from Gaza, I was invited to advise on the reuse of the settlements when the Palestinian Ministry of Planning was thinking of what to do with them when evacuated.

MM: So you were called in as a consultant?

EW: I was part of the group of planners and politicians in the Palestinian ministry. Obviously, it was rather chaotic. Nobody knew what was happening and when, because Israel did not provide any reliable information about its intentions, whether it would leave the houses standing or whether they would be destroyed, or when it all would happen. From Israel's perspective, it was an entirely unilateral operation. But still, the frame of the question was that if there is going to be an evacuation, there are going to be new sites available, properties, infrastructure, and there's going to be a lot of demand for them in an area that is extremely dense, aggravated by a land system that leaves few public lands. The Ministry of Planning was the office through which all the international organizations and politicians entered this discussion. All major geopolitical players—the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and so on—had their own thoughts and their own proposals and optimistic fantasies, and they presented them like in a giant board meeting.

So the situation was complex, difficult, and rather frustrating. There was this assumption that the Ministry of Planning would adopt one of the plans that were largely seeking privatization of the land, but in fact, it had no power to do so.

Furthermore, the ministry, I quickly learned, had its own agenda that had much to do with internal struggles within the Palestinian Authority. Land was at the center of it all. Yet at the time, the Palestinian Authority was the only body that was, in principle, at least partially publicly accountable.

In Gaza, a large proportion of the land on which the settlements stood was a different type of public or collective land that the occupation called “state land” and used for the purposes of Jewish settlers. Some of it was fields that previously belonged to private owners. Settlement planners, whenever they could, preferred to build on public lands—it was easier, because they could better face challenges in the High Court . . . although in total, about half of the settlement area, Gaza and the West Bank included, is built on private property.

So it was the public land that people like the World Bank and the IMF sought to sell to investors for all sorts of uses, from industry to hotels and tourism. What we were saying was the opposite and rather simple: private land should go back to people who owned it—this is clear enough—but public land should be reserved for the public for supporting public functions where so little land was available. We resisted the idea of privatizing things in advance or by default.

Second, we did not want simply to propose the reuse of the evacuated settlement homes as private housing (we didn’t know they would be destroyed), which might reproduce similar social hierarchy in space and enforce the continuity of colonial history. You know, in the history of decolonization, most buildings were reused in the very same way as before. When you have debates about reuse, they are rather robust and intense, such as the famous debate between Nehru and Gandhi about the reuse of the Viceroy Palace, which Gandhi wanted to use as a hospital for the poor. In Gaza, settlement homes were pretty good houses; our idea was to turn these suburban structures into a nucleus of public institutions. Rather than destroy them, as some wanted, or simply reproduce their use as gated communities for the elite, we recommended their transformation. We succeeded in only three cases, in what Israel calls “isolated settlements.” These were outposts that were generally very close to the Palestinian urban fabric and that could be considered as part of that fabric. They were seen as “isolated” from the perspective of Israeli geography, but they were almost urban from the Palestinian perspective. They were simultaneously urban and suburban, as we later put it in the context of the work Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and I undertook in *Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency*.

YM: You’ve said that Israel has deliberately destroyed many evacuated settlements precisely to avoid the image of the potential reversibility of the occupation and the potential reusability of these structures.

EW: Yes, Netanyahu, who is very media and image conscious, was the first to realize that the power of such images—Arabs living in the homes of Jews—could designate a certain reversal and reversibility of the Zionist project. He therefore called for their destruction. He thus pointed out the relation of politics and architecture as organized by the media.

YM: What strikes me about your work is your refusal to reduce it to just Israel versus Palestine in a clear-cut opposition, even though of course you highlight and work to resist the massive unevenness of the overall occupation. But you insist on tracing the multiplicity of agents that are on the ground; you read the Wall, for instance, as a kind of political seismograph, as an index of all these heterogeneous forces that are irreducible to top-down sovereignty. Do you sometimes encounter resistance to this insistence on a kind of micropolitical analysis that departs somewhat from the idea of Israel as a monolithic oppressor? It is a different frame from what one often hears among some in the U.S. or European left.

EW: Of course there are many detractors of this mode of critique and the kind of activism that is derived from it. Some comrades claim that this type of reading makes things more complicated than necessary—that insisting on this kind of complexity gives credibility to the system, or even worse, that by according the occupation a level of complexity and sometimes sophistication, we glamorize it. I think that this is a typical postmodern confusion that can see complexity and elasticity only as inherently liberating.

I find these positions weak. It is counterproductive to create a false essentialism, which more often than not blocks, or worse, polices the boundaries of thinking and acting. Further, the micropolitical, microphysical research and the microagencies that I track in my work are the “how” of the colonization and therefore the “how” of resistance to it.

MM: Can you tell us about the work you have been doing recently?

EW: Over the last few years, together with Thomas Keenan, Susan Schuppli, and others at the Centre for Research Architecture, I have been engaged in building upon the different experiences I have had with the practice of architecture, with conflict, and with international law to think through the problems of “forensic architecture.” This takes place at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London. It includes a collaboration with a number of NGOs and cultural institutions. It is a large project, funded by the European Research Council’s program of “frontier research.” The term “forensic architecture” has been used in the field of property surveying for some time, but we extracted it from this context and aim to place it as a field of practice within the context of the

prosecution of war crimes. This strategy is based on my previous experience in presenting architectural evidence in several international legal cases. The intention is to sketch out and theorize an emergent relation between architectural research and international law. Many possible methodologies are scattered in the fields of building conservation, archaeology, urban analysis, architectural theory, and damage-assessment engineering, but “forensic architecture” has not yet been formulated as a field with its own assumptions, problems, and propositions. Space enters the legal process as a mediatized representation: as images, drawings, films, maps, models, and the remote sensing of built structures, environments, and their ruins. It is quite evident that these types of spatial representations now often frequently appear in international courts.

Between 2002 and 2004, for example, I had the opportunity to track a series of petitions against the Wall in the Israeli High Court of Justice and at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, because I provided drawings that were presented as evidence there. And the use of spatial representations, and especially of satellite imagery, continuously increases. In September 2009, using geospatial data, high-resolution satellite imagery, and data gathered in on-site investigations into destroyed buildings, the Goldstone Fact Finding Mission for the UN Human Rights Council and Human Rights Watch (HRW) alleged that the Israeli military had deliberately destroyed homes and infrastructure in the Gaza Strip.⁴ In Iraq, HRW had done something similar when it attempted to conduct a forensic analysis of rubble in order to determine how and why civilians were killed in the early stages of the U.S. invasion in 2003.

In these places, as well as in Iran and in Darfur, the inability or lack of enthusiasm to employ researchers on the ground means that international processes, whether juridical or political, increasingly rely on the interpretation of satellite imagery. This is mainly before-and-after imagery. So buildings become the resource from which political events and intentions can be read. Satellite images and other geospatial technologies are used to corroborate claims of structural damage in conflict zones. Thus, we are told Iran wants to develop nuclear capability and are shown buildings and earthworks from the air. The organization Eyes on Darfur has monitored the conflict with satellite imagery, with experts called in to interpret them.

As much as spatial representations start structuring our understanding of conflict, the courts and judges are not always very used to understanding these spatial representations. If legal claims in conflict zones have acquired a territorial and spatial dimension, then we need to think harder about the implications of this. What is the place of architecture and the built environment within the institutions and the language of international law? How does the introduction of spatial representation

affect the legal process? What is the relation of these types of evidence to testimony? In a sense I can say that the project deals with the increased significance of architectural evidence and also with the way it has somewhat shifted the focus of investigations away from human testimony, so we look at the methodological, legal, political and ethical implications of this shift.

Overall, then, I can say that my interest in this project is twofold: first in developing forensic architecture as an operative concept and analytical method for probing the events and histories inscribed in spatial artifacts and in built environments—for this we need to survey the above practices and work technically—and second, simultaneously in thinking critically about this practice. What are its potentials, and what are its limits? What are its political and ethical pitfalls? The project takes neither a purely practical nor a purely critical approach, but rather combines them both. Finally, the term “forensics” is what enables architecture to become a diagnostic technique in forums different from the academic.

YM: Can you talk about your methodology? We know that destruction takes on particular forms—it is not just unreadable chaos.

EW: Yes. We see buildings as sensors of sorts. We are interested in the way by which both slow processes of transformation and abrupt events are registered in their details and materialities. Buildings are just freeze shots of a process of constant transformation. A building’s skin—the first few millimeters of a building—is like a membrane that is in constant movement. It expands and contracts with temperature changes, swelling or crumbling, slowly degenerating. This transformation is not the corruption of architecture, but rather part of the process of form making. Cracks are also interesting—they connect mineral geological formations and architectural forms.

But there are also more obvious and practical implications that are more directly related to war-crime investigation. In fact, the investigation of Israel’s destruction in Gaza described in the Goldstone Report represents a methodological shift in several respects. Initially, it designates a shift in emphasis from witnessing to evidence. More attention and more resources were given to scientific evidence in the general balance. Of course, there were several dozens of witnesses interviewed for the Goldstone Report, but there was an implicit assumption that the testimony of people would be hard to defend, because it would be considered to have been manipulated by Hamas, and that public opinion, mainly in the West, is too biased to understand or listen to such testimony. This is a disturbing assumption.

So autopsy reports and investigations of the ruins of buildings somewhat overshadow the testimony of the living. Human Rights Watch employed a former target specialist in their investigation of the ruins. This shows that together with the

shift in emphasis from human testimony to forensic evidence, different sets of skills and different types of people have entered the human rights world. It is now no longer only the empathic and compassionate human rights workers, but scientists and ex-soldiers who have gradually become part of the investigation.

YM: Given that the military apparently also takes the legality of its procedures very seriously, does it maintain an archive of evidence to demonstrate that it has indeed followed its own professed protocols—for example, those of proportionality in violence or warning?

EW: Yes, in fact, the paradox is that Israel's attack on Gaza in the winter of 2008–2009 was both one of the most violent and destructive since the Nakba of 1948 and, crucially, also the attack in which Israeli experts in international humanitarian law were most closely involved. So we can legitimately ask whether the use of the law here helped proliferate destruction. The Israeli military, like other militaries worldwide, has become very mindful of its exposure to international legal action. And of course, as you suggested, new legal technologies were introduced to military practice, such as issuing all sorts of new “warnings,” which includes a set of warnings—by telephone or leaflets or megaphones or warning shots—ordering people to evacuate the battlefield. This seemingly humanitarian approach has ended up allowing unparalleled levels of destruction, because when receiving such a warning, people who choose to stay are unjustifiably regarded by the military as voluntary human shields and thus as legitimate targets. International law not as a static body of rules, but rather an arena in which the law is shaped by an endless series of diffused “border conflicts” over what is and is not illegal. The question is who has the political influence, the authority, or the military power to force their interpretation to become authoritative.

YM: So where does this leave you?

EW: I think that one has to work according to two principles—it is a double strategy: to work both within and outside of the frame of international law. The law can be very useful, but it can't do all the political work necessary to address injustice and rights issues. In the work I have done so far, cartography or other forms of political representation were used in the courts, but they were also used outside them. Every different forum in which spatial issues are represented has its own logic.

An interesting example is the use of the evidence of destroyed buildings undertaken by the Gaza-based and Hamas-run Ministry of Public Works and Housing. It started compiling its own “book of the destruction” in the aftermath of the 2008–2009 attack. This archive contains thousands of entries, each documenting a single building that was completely or partially destroyed, from cracked walls

in houses that still stand to those completely reduced to piles of rubble. This is another instance of forensic architecture, but it is not the legal framework that it is aimed at; rather it is practical in the sense of being directed at reconstruction and political in connecting this destruction to a history of Palestinian displacement.

YM: Forensics is of course a concern for many human rights activists, especially in reading things such as mass graves, but this specifically architectural approach seems like a new avenue.

EW: In the institution of the field of forensics, the conjunction of bones and ruins makes for a good analogy. Yes, in war-crime investigations, forensic sciences started to appear in the late 1980s, mainly from within the discipline of forensic anthropology, that is, exhumations of the victims of war crimes. Bone diggers use the term “osteobiography” to refer to the attempt to read the life story—not only the moment of death—of an individual from the bones in which these events are registered. So I guess that the analogy might extend to images of ruins, cities, landscapes, even deforestations. These can reveal the longer-term political processes that are saturated in them.

A conjunction might be the forensic architecture work we undertake for the prosecution in Guatemala courts. This is reconstruction and modeling we do for the FAFG—the Guatemala Forensic Anthropology Foundation—in the context of trials undertaken in regard to the genocide inflicted on the Mayan people and in particular the Ixil in the Quiche region of West Guatemala in the early 1980s. We joined FAFG archaeologists on a trip to the forest area to find traces of villages that were completely destroyed and that became overgrown with vegetation. Finding remnants of these villages requires attention not only to possible ruins—many of the buildings were made of organic materials and were consumed by the forest—but to patterns of vegetation, because some cultivated species remain in higher densities in areas where the forest overgrew most ruins. So there are statistics, patterns, and numbers of destroyed homes that we are looking for and modeling.

MM: So buildings will provide a different kind of evidentiary function than standard conventions of documentary exposure would allow; the modeling will trace very precisely the form and trajectory of an action—of an act of destruction?

EW: Yes, we hope, but as I mentioned, forensic architecture rarely has an immediate relation to the spaces, ruins, buildings, and landscapes that it studies. It mostly approaches spaces as they are registered and recorded in different media. In this respect, you must also consider the politics of this media, whether it is satellite images, other forms of digital topographic mapping, different scanners and remote sensing technologies, cameras, videos, and mobile-phone devices. If we analyze



A boy looking at his former home in the al-Salam quarter in Gaza City, which was destroyed by the Israeli army during the attack on the Gaza Strip at the turn of 2008/09 (photo: Kai Wiedenhoefer).

a space as registered in media, then we must use but also think about this media, its presentation in different forums—courts or otherwise. I will try to give you several examples.

We have done much analysis based on activist video footage—what we call “image-to-space analysis.” This project, like most other complex media and technology-driven projects we undertake, we did with Situ Studio, a New York-based architectural practice. One of the cases we have researched together was based on multiple and simultaneous video documentations of the April 17, 2009, killing of Bassem Abu Rahma in Bil’in during a demonstration against the Wall. He was hit with a gas canister shot directly at him through the barrier, which is a system of fences in this area. We started by synching multiple videos together, then these with satellite images, and reconstructed from them a dynamic 3D model. There were three videos that show Abu Rahma from different perspectives, the location of the Wall, and the soldiers who shot him. With Situ, we have traced the movement of each camera on a computer terrain model. It is a dynamic process because all the people involved—the camera people, the soldiers, and Abu Rahma himself—constantly move. From this, we managed to identify the place and angle from which he was shot. The investigation was widely reported and opened a legal process against the soldier. It is a little something within a situation of almost complete impossibilities.

Now we try to apply what we learned from this and apply it to more complex scenarios, conducting image-to-space analysis of recent incidents in Syria and Egypt similarly recorded on multiple cameras from different angles. When an activist holds a camera, she or he “Hoovers” in a lot of spatial data that could be useful for spatial scene reconstruction. When you have more than one camera in a scene and both record similar things, it is easier to reconstruct a scene in 3D.

Our research also includes the work of a group of postgraduate students at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths. They explore other incidents and the legal, spatial, and conceptual problems associated with them. In all these cases, space is a media product. Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani from our group have undertaken an analysis for a petition that should ultimately be presented at the Strasbourg European Court for Human Rights. It is a case against nonintervention on the high seas, basically when vessels of European states ignore migrants in peril in the Mediterranean sea. The project seeks to turn the European surveillance of the Mediterranean against itself. If the states of the southern littoral, such as France and Italy, can monitor almost everything that happens in the sea, they are obligated to intervene when SOS calls are made. Situ Studio helped again in mapping out the changing “architecture” of the sea in relation to the path approximated by the coordinates from which SOS calls were made by a satellite phone in a

particular migrant boat. They also were able to map the paths of European vessels by looking at different image sources, such as satellite images and remote sensing, as well as boat itineraries, and also from images of boats in the phone cameras of migrants themselves.

YM: While important, numbers in and of themselves do not tell the kind of forensic stories that you are interested in putting forward in legal terms. Presented in sheerly quantitative terms, such data tell us nothing about the forms, strategies, and techniques of the destruction. In a recent lecture, you made the same observation about analyses of the Battle of Jenin [2002], in which there was much emphasis placed on the number of houses destroyed while ignoring the strategic design evident in the footprint of the Israeli Defense Forces: to clear a pathway for tanks, to break up spaces of resistance.

EW: At the end of an attack, such as that of Jenin, you are left with survivors' testimonies and material ruins, and you need to build a story. For this, you need to understand the logic of military maneuvers—the logic of urban warfare as a form of urban design. Militaries often believe that to win over the city, they have to change the logic by which the city operates. Battle spaces are messy, but there are logics and patterns in them. In Jenin, the Israeli military needed to get the tanks into the center of the town. They mobilized bulldozers from all directions to cut roads through the city. It is one thing to say that four hundred out of two thousand buildings were destroyed in this process, but it is another to understand how and why you see patterns within this destruction.

YM: So even as they do not proceed seamlessly, these techniques of destruction become a kind of de facto urban planning in the manner of Haussmann in nineteenth-century Paris?

EW: Yes. Consider also the reconstruction process of Jenin, led by Red Crescent donations from the United Arab Emirates. It has in effect continued the logic of the paths cut by the IDF during the battle, widening the roads there.

MM: You've called this the "decamping" of refugees, a technique for breaking up or at least rationalizing the space of the camps.

EW: Yes, because the idea on the part of the IDF is that the camp is not simply the physical location of resistance, but also the "breeding ground" for insurgents—that is, the conditions there create resistance. Undoing these conditions is one of the aims of the destruction and of the reconstruction, which are often continuous. This is the "war on refugees"—a kind of violence that seeks not to kill all the refugees, necessarily, but to undo "refugeeness" as a political category—and it is

undertaken by different states—not only Israel, but at different periods also Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Those destroying the camps can take advantage of the fact that these spaces are financed and somewhat governed by international institutions and donors—they can couple their technologies of destruction with an anticipated humanitarian “upgrade” of the camps by such institutions in the aftermath of battle.

MM: Though the Israeli public is not being exposed to the same kind of physical violence, I wonder if you could say that they are also test subjects of sorts. In other words, how far can the IDF push the parameters of what they can do to a population before they cross the threshold of accountability and liability, whether in the judgment of the Israeli polity, of the Israeli courts, or of the international media?

EW: By operating constantly on the margin of the law, “creatively” reinterpreting it, putting pressure on established norms, Israeli military lawyers have been able to push the thresholds you mentioned. It also seems as if the creative interpretation of the law has shifted from the left to the right. Critical legal studies was a post-structuralist development in the theory of law that insisted on the indeterminate, contingent, and elastic nature of the law. This was done in the search for a certain liberating potential in this elasticity, but some of these principles are now used by state agents as they look for untapped potential in the laws of war. Michael Sfrad, who is one of the most prominent human rights lawyers, called Israeli military lawyers “anarchists against the law.”

MM: I have a question in response to what you are saying about the human rights groups and the territorial proximity of the court to the scene of the abuses. This is a basic point, but it seems that in having the highest court of appeal being run by Israelis, even those judges and lawyers who are committed to human rights as an abstract principle are still operating within the framework of Israeli sovereignty and Israeli law. This is distinct from the more familiar scenario in which human rights grievances are taken to the court of another country or to an international court that would presumably not have a bias built into it in favor of the state that is being accused of abuses. A lot of NGO work in the Global North entails advocating for people who are miles away and making claims in forums that are not under the jurisdiction of the offending state. Of course, the situation differs from case to case in contemporary human rights work across the world, but this seems to be an extreme situation of the court being embedded within the social and political sphere in which the abuses are taking place.

EW: Yes, universal jurisdiction is only seldom exercised. It has led to some Israeli generals and politicians not disembarking from flights to London and Spain, but

not to trials. Moreover, in Israel's internal exercise of international human rights law, the proximity you mentioned means that you often meet the same people in different roles. First someone may be an officer in the army, then become a human rights lawyer, and then go into the army again on reserve duty. Sometimes people working for humanitarian organizations become humanitarian officers for the army. Civilian lawyers serve in the military courts. Some of the people who designed the Israeli military's "humanitarian policy" were former Israeli humanitarians working with the UN. If the Wall becomes an international border, it will be the first ever to have been designed together with human rights experts.

MM: I was struck by the actual inroads made by NGOs, who clearly have their own agendas and interests. How is it that Israel allows this, because by doing so, they are opening up the playing field for other actors to come in that are not fully under their control. Does it become about money, about their image on the international scene, about their embrace of human rights norms?

EW: It depends how cynical you want to be. In a press conference, an NGO person asked an IDF general, "What would happen if we all just pulled out?" And the general replied, "Then there'd be total chaos. We would not be able to govern without you." So the prospect of ungovernable chaos is a potentially powerful political option. But NGOs are drawn into generating order and sometimes inadvertently into participating in governing.

YM: To be clear, acknowledging all of these double binds and complicities does not mean taking simply a cynical approach to human rights; it is the very condition of the work.

EW: There is a problem that is structural, and we acknowledge that. Between complete refusal and tactical embrace, the difficulty of the dilemma faced by human rights people and humanitarians is equally in practicing and in avoiding it. However, the question is not about dismissing the entire field and principle of human rights, but involves asking frankly in a manner of autocritique how such a contradiction could be translated into more productive political practice.

MM: This brings to mind the case of Mohammed Dahla—the human rights lawyer who petitioned in the first case against the Wall in the Israeli High Court of Justice—whom you mentioned in a recent lecture.

EW: Yes, he was the first one to conduct a trial on behalf of villagers—those of Beit Sureik, near Jerusalem, when the Wall encroached on their lands. And he won the case in the sense of forcing the state to move the Wall closer to the Green Line so that its path better reflects the principle of proportionality between human rights

violations and security issues. The problem was that the trial also meant that the path of the Wall now became the result of a legal process.

I was interested in these trials of the wall because they were not trials of people—designers or builders—but trials of a thing, meant to regulate the behavioral properties of the Wall. When a model of the Wall was called as evidence into court—and it was the first such time that a model was produced and used there—the judges had to step down to approach it, calling the lawyers from both parties to join them. There was a disruption, because the physical presence of the model disturbed the usual structure and protocols, and there was an unordered conversation. It was the “object quality” of the model, its function as evidence, that changed the choreography of the legal process and the language in which it was discussed.

When the judge asked Dahla why he had described alternative “lesser evil” routes, he answered that it was not in order to propose them, but to render illegal the line that the state actually had built by showing that there is a less drastic way to achieve a similar security objective. Furthermore, the line he had proposed crossed the Green Line into Israeli territory, as much as to say: “If you want to build a wall, build it in your own land,” but this was also a way to make sure that the line he proposed could not be fully adopted by the state in practice.

Simultaneously with this trial in the Israeli High Court, Dahla helped conduct another in the International Court of Justice in The Hague. It so happened that he had to argue against the legality of the entire Wall in The Hague at the same time that he had to argue against the details of its execution in Jerusalem . . . a paradox—right? This contradiction could be explained by the fact that he operated simultaneously from inside and outside Israeli law. In many ways, his “win” in Jerusalem might have been a Pyrrhic victory, because from that moment on, in a weird process of participation in which the victims design their own prison, human rights lawyers started to design the Wall with the military.

YM: So this approach interrogates and even displaces the very parameters of the discussion from within.

EW: Dahla is also a lawyer for Balad, the Arab party in Israel, which stands for a civic, rather than a Jewish state. Lawyers working inside the state constantly face the dilemma of having to use Israeli law, on the one hand, and to protest the injustice that exists within it, on the other. Many lawyers explain their selection of cases on the ground that they constitute precedent-setting legal challenges that expose paradoxes between the state’s democratic pretence and its colonial realities. But this is of course a double-edged sword, especially when the justice system has been so fully taken to be a part of the political conflict. From time to time, Israeli lawyers



Parties assemble around the model, 2008 (illustrations: Christine Cornell and Eyal Weizman).

consider alternative forms of action to that of petitioning the High Court: connecting local legal struggles to international legal action and boycotting local courts. These alternatives not yet been enacted consistently, because frankly, the sector of human rights has its own inertias, and this is also tied to the way they are financed. There has not yet been a lawyer of the stature of Jacques Vergès here—somebody who has managed to enact the “rupture strategy” in turning the law against itself or using it politically in an effective way.⁵ The rupture is also of course an aesthetic moment when things that were kept out of the court or out of public visibility all of a sudden become visible. Here is another dimension of forensics. Forensics is of course not only about the science of investigation, but about the performative dimension of presentation—about the theatrics and gesture of expertise and the use of technology, about what we can call “forensic aesthetics.”

MM: How would you characterize this other register? I wonder if Jacques Rancière’s notion of the distribution of the senses is pertinent here—a shift in perception that destabilizes or multiplies the ossified frames of the discussion. You’ve said that you don’t necessarily go to court and simply or immediately challenge international humanitarian law, for instance, because you still need it as a point of reference. But there is still the imperative to question both the norms that would authorize a moderating technique such as the warning and the justification for bombarding the city in the first place.

EW: The court is not only a mechanism to debate the terms under discussion, and using its language does more than affirm it. It is also a platform and a theatre in which one makes issues visible, which is always, as you mentioned, a political task. Architecture is a good frame for doing this because buildings, cities, and their representations can communicate things in different ways than human witnesses.

This is also true of forensics in general. If the political is the rearrangement of the sensible, the fact that the testimony of things, nonhuman witnesses of all sorts, enters the court in different forms reconfigures the nature of what testimony means in the first place. But this “speech of things” is not without its dangers—not only the dangers of complicity that we discussed, but those when a scientific process supersedes and replaces the human voice.

YM: What you said before about architectural proposals as future-oriented fictions also sounds very Rancièrian, as when he writes that fictions involve “the introduction of a visible field of experience, which then modifies the regime of the visible. It is not opposed to reality; it splits reality and reconfigures it as its double.”⁶ This brings to mind some of the experimental design projects you’ve been working on with Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti under the rubric of “decolonizing architecture.”

EW: Maybe it is more interesting to call these “experiments in architectural fiction.” The projection of future scenarios—as possible fictions—can sometimes activate a latent political dimension. In other words, using architectural provocations, you can put dormant situations in motion and provoke systems to enact and reveal their logic. The provocation that architectural design can achieve produces the very knowledge upon which it seeks to comment. This can actually invert the relation between research and practice. While previously we thought that research is a prerequisite of practice and that you need to know in order to act, this realization reverses this logic: you also intervene as a form of research. This is an “incitatory” action, a research that produces its own subject. It is a kind of an epistemological attack that I think can capture the nature of how we see practice—artistic, architectural, and cultural—as the production of knowledge today.

NOTES

1. Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape* (New York: Scribner, 2008).
2. Yehezkel Lein, in collaboration with Eyal Weizman, *Land Grab: Israel's Settlement Policy in the West Bank*, ed. Yael Stein, trans. Shaul Vardi and Zvi Shulman (May 2002), http://www.btselem.org/download/200205_land_grab_eng.pdf.
3. Edward W. Said, “Palestinians under Siege,” in Roane Carey (ed.), *The New Intifada: Resisting Israel's Apartheid* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 33.
4. See United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council, “Human Rights in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories: Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict,” A/HRC/12/48, September 25, 2009, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48.pdf>.
5. French defense lawyer Jacques Vergès is best known for employing the “rupture strategy” or “rupture defense,” in which the defense attorney accuses the prosecution of the same offenses as those with which the defendant is charged, most notably crimes against humanity.
6. Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 99.