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# The Politics of Verticality

By Eyal Weizman

The West Bank as an Architectural Construction by Eyal Weizman

Since the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza strip, a colossal project of strategic, territorial and architectural planning has lain at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For this artists project, Eyal Weizman, Anselm Franke and Rafi Segal have collaborated with the photographer Daniel Bauer to recreate the visual panorama they exhibited as part of Berlin Kunst Werke's 'Territories' exhibition last summer. The panorama is accompanied by extracts from Eyal Weizman's essay 'The Politics of Verticality', originally published on [Opendemocracy.net](http://Opendemocracy.net). This artist's project follows co-exhibitor Kate Rich's account of 'Territories' and Phillip Misselwitz and Eyal Weizman's text 'Military Operations as Urban Planning', both of which can be found on [Metamute.com](http://Metamute.com), and concludes Mute's series on the subject

In the Middle East, the landscape and built environment have become the primary arena of conflict. Jewish settlements – statesponsored islands of 'territorial and personal democracy', manifestations of the Zionist pioneering ethos – are placed on hilltops overlooking the dense and rapidly changing fabric of Palestinian cities and villages. 'First' and 'Third' Worlds spread out in a fragmented patchwork: a territorial ecosystem of externally alienated, internally homogenised enclaves located next to, within, above or below each other. The border ceased long ago to be a single continuous line and broke up into a series of separate makeshift boundaries, internal checkpoints and security apparatuses. The total fragmentation of the terrain as it appears on the plan demanded the design of continuity across its territorial reality. Israeli roads and infrastructure thereafter connected settlements by stretching over, or diving underneath, Palestinian lands. Along similar lines, Ariel Sharon's most recent plan proposes a Palestinian State constituted on a few estranged territorial enclaves 'connected by tunnels and bridges', while further insisting that Israel retains sovereignty over the water aquifers underneath Palestinian areas and the airspace and electromagnetic fields above them.

Indeed, a new way of imagining territory has been developed for the West Bank. The region is no longer seen as the two-dimensional surface of a single territory, but as a large three-dimensional volume, containing a series of layered ethnic, political and strategic territories. Separate security corridors, infrastructure, and underground resources have thus been woven into an Escher-like domain that struggles to multiply unitary space.

I have named this process of splitting and serialising territory the 'Politics of Verticality'. Having begun as a set of ideas, policies, projects and regulations proposed by Israeli state-technocrats, generals, archaeologists, planners and road engineers upon West Bank occupation, it now thrives as the predominant means by which territorial control is exercised, and territorial 'solutions' are sought.

Settlement master planners like Matityahu Drobles and Ariel Sharon aimed to secure territorial control from high-lying points. Former US president Bill Clinton also sincerely believed in a vertical solution to the problem of partitioning the Temple Mount. For his part, Ron Pundak, the 'architect' of the Oslo Accords, described partitioning the West Bank by means of a three-dimensional matrix of roads and tunnels as the only practical way to divide an indivisible territory. And Gilead Sher, Israeli chief negotiator at Camp David (and divorce lawyer) described such methods to me as simple techniques for negotiating and bridging, their apparent enlargement of the 'cake' leaving each side feeling it got more. Geo-politics is a flattening discourse. It largely ignores the vertical dimension, preferring to look across landscape than cut through it. This equates with the cartographic imagination inherited from the modern state's military and political spatialities. Politics and law perceive geographical terrain only

through tools available to them – in this case two dimensional maps and plans by which borders are drawn as lines.

Traditional international borders are political tools; following the principles of property law, their geometric form could be described as that of vertical planes extending from the centre of the earth to the height of the sky. The departure from a planar division of territory to the creation of three-dimensional boundaries across sovereign bulks defines anew the relationship between sovereignty and space.

The ‘Politics of Verticality’ entails revisioning existing cartographic techniques. It creates a territorial hologram in which political acts of manipulation and multiplication transform a two-dimensional surface into a three-dimensional volume, thereby evading established models of spatial analysis.

By-pass roads attempt to separate Israeli traffic networks from Palestinian ones, preferably without ever allowing them to cross. They illuminate how two separate geographies occupying the same landscape can overlap. At points where the networks cross, a makeshift separation is created. Most often, small dust roads are dug for Palestinians underneath the wide, high-speed motorways on which Israeli vans and military vehicles rush between settlements. More grandiose Israeli projects have proposed highways with which to bypass Palestinian towns in three dimensions. The Tunnel Road, for example, connects Jerusalem with the southern settlements of Gush Etzion and, beyond, to the Jewish neighbourhoods of Hebron. To accomplish this, it has to perform a double contortion: having stretched upwards as a bridge crossing over a cultivated Palestinian valley, it then dives into a tunnel under the Palestinian Bethlehem suburb of Bet Jallah.

The Israeli historian Meron Benvenisti writes: ‘And indeed the person travelling on the longest bridge in the country and penetrating the earth through the longest tunnel may ignore the fact that over his head there is a whole Palestinian town and that on his way from the housing projects [of the Jerusalem neighbourhood] of Gilo to the housing projects of the city of Efrat and Etzion (settlement) block he does not come across a single Arab.’

In the West Bank, bridges are no longer just devices engineered to overcome a natural boundary or connect disconnected points in space. Rather, they become the boundary itself, separating two national groups across the vertical dimension.

This type of a division was first proposed in the 1947 UN Partition Plan. At two locations within it, the ‘kissing points’ where the territories of Israel and Palestine were to cross and the single-dimensional boundary line was to become a nondimensional point, a bridge-over-tunnel design was proposed as the solution for the maintenance of territorial contiguity. It was precisely at places where the border was ‘reduced’ in this manner that solutions had to depart from the two dimensional paradigm and adopt a three dimensional approach. The present demographic dispersal is even more demanding. The Camp David proposals for the partition of Jerusalem necessitate several of these ‘kissing points’ between separate Israeli and Palestinian neighbourhoods. Under the Clinton plan, Jerusalem would have had 64 kilometres of walls and 40 sovereign bridges and tunnels connecting the enclaves to each other. But the project requires intense effort from government legal experts, as there are almost no precedents for property and bilateral law in three dimensions.

The connection of Gaza and the West Bank – the two estranged Palestinian territories that, according to the Oslo accord, are to form a single political unit – poses similar problems, only on a larger scale. The distance between them is 47 kilometres as the crow flies. But the so called ‘safe passage’ might well still be the same as that proposed throughout all peace negotiations – a Palestinian route including six-lane motorways, two railway lines, high-voltage electricity cables and an oil pipe connecting the two enclaves across Israeli territory. Israeli and Palestinian engineers proposed a bewildering variety

of possible solutions to that particular engineering challenge. A tunnel, a ditch, a land road cut off from the landscape with dykes on either side, a viaduct... The political debate turned very quickly to the question of 'who's on top'. Avoiding the integrative solution of a land road, Israel asked for the Palestinian sovereign road to run through a seven-metre deep ditch. The Palestinians naturally preferred a bridge. They would hold sovereignty over the road, while Israel's sovereignty would extend to the under-part of the viaduct and its columns. The thermodynamic joint would act as an international border.

'The Politics of Verticality' (here I am referring to the complete essay) attempts to provide both a political critique of architecture and an architectural critique of politics. The former looks at the way in which, fixated by and responding to the paranoid drive for separation and segregation, architecture and planning appropriates landscape to turn it into a tool of domination and control. The latter describes how, attempting to base national authentications on the production of imaginary geographies, the idea of 'territory' is multiplied into a series of physical and metaphorical 'territories' to be organised in a multi-layered construction. The political deployment of aesthetic categories relating to landscape, archaeology, architecture and cartography have turned the West Bank into a theoretically constructed artifice. What may at first glance seem to be a pastoral natural landscape for the possession of which conflict is waged, is in effect the artificial arrangement of a totally synthetic environment as consciously designed as any built one. In it, 'natural' elements like streams, mountains, forest orchards, rocks and ruins function not as elements to fight over but as the weapons and ammunition of the conflict itself – sometimes even as the very subject waging the war.

With the technologies and infrastructure required for the physical segregation of Israelis and Palestinians running along such complex volumetric borders, it seems, furthermore, as if the intricate geo-political problem of the Middle East has gone through a scale-shift to take on positively architectural dimensions. Here, the West Bank appears to have been re-assembled to resemble a complex building with multiple enclaves, observation points, security corridors, infrastructural networks – and associated archaeological traces. Like in a conventional archaeological site, these elements of the landscape now function as evidence through which the political process can be investigated.

The complete version of 'The Politics of Verticality' can be found on OpenDemocracy:  
[<http://www.opendemocracy.net> ]

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