



Above – the threshold of a private plot meeting the public street. Below – ‘The separation Wall’ dividing the urban fabric

“Atabet Al Bab” (Threshold)

A conceptual plan for a playground in East Jerusalem

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Borders in “the united city”

“Israelis and Palestinians alike feel that neither the physical nor the spiritual landscape is divisible” (Meron Benvenisti)

“The linear border, a cartographic imaginary inherited from the military and political spatiality of the nation state has splintered into multitude of temporary transportable, deployable and removable border synonyms – ‘separation wall’, ‘barriers’, ‘blockades’, ‘closures’, ‘road blocks’, ‘checkpoints’, ‘sterile areas’, ‘special security zones’, ‘closed military zones’ and ‘killing zones’ – that shrink and expand the territory at will.” (Eyal Weizman)

On the wall of the primary school in the Arab neighborhood of Beit Hanina, in East-Jerusalem there is a map of Palestine. The land shown in the map appears as one coherent unit, with no indication of internal separations. It is bounded by the borders of pre 1948 Palestine, as it was in the times of the British mandatory government. A map of the same piece of land hangs on the walls of the Jewish schools in the western part of the city. Although seemingly identical, the land in the Hebrew speaking schools bears a different name. It is not Palestine, but rather, The Land of Israel.

The reality on ground is very different from the seamless land that hangs on the school walls. Unsynchronized systems of political, municipal and military boundaries divide the land. The most notable political border is known as ‘The Green Line’ – the 1949 armistice line drawn as part of the agreements that ended the 1948 War. In 1967, after Israel seized West Bank (and other territories) green line as a physical border ceased to exist. However, on a political and administrative level it is still relevant. Palestinians living in the West Bank are still subject to Israeli military rule (with the exception 18% of the area that is under the rule Palestinian Authority since 1995).

The municipal border of Israeli governed Jerusalem was expanded, for political reasons, after the 1967 war. The new municipal area included not only the eastern part of Mandatory Jerusalem but also 28 Palestinian villages and areas of the West Bank that surrounded the city.

While the state of Israel celebrated 50 years since ‘the unification of Jerusalem’, Palestinian life in the city is marked by half a century in an enclave, as the Palestinian civic status is that of merely ‘residence’

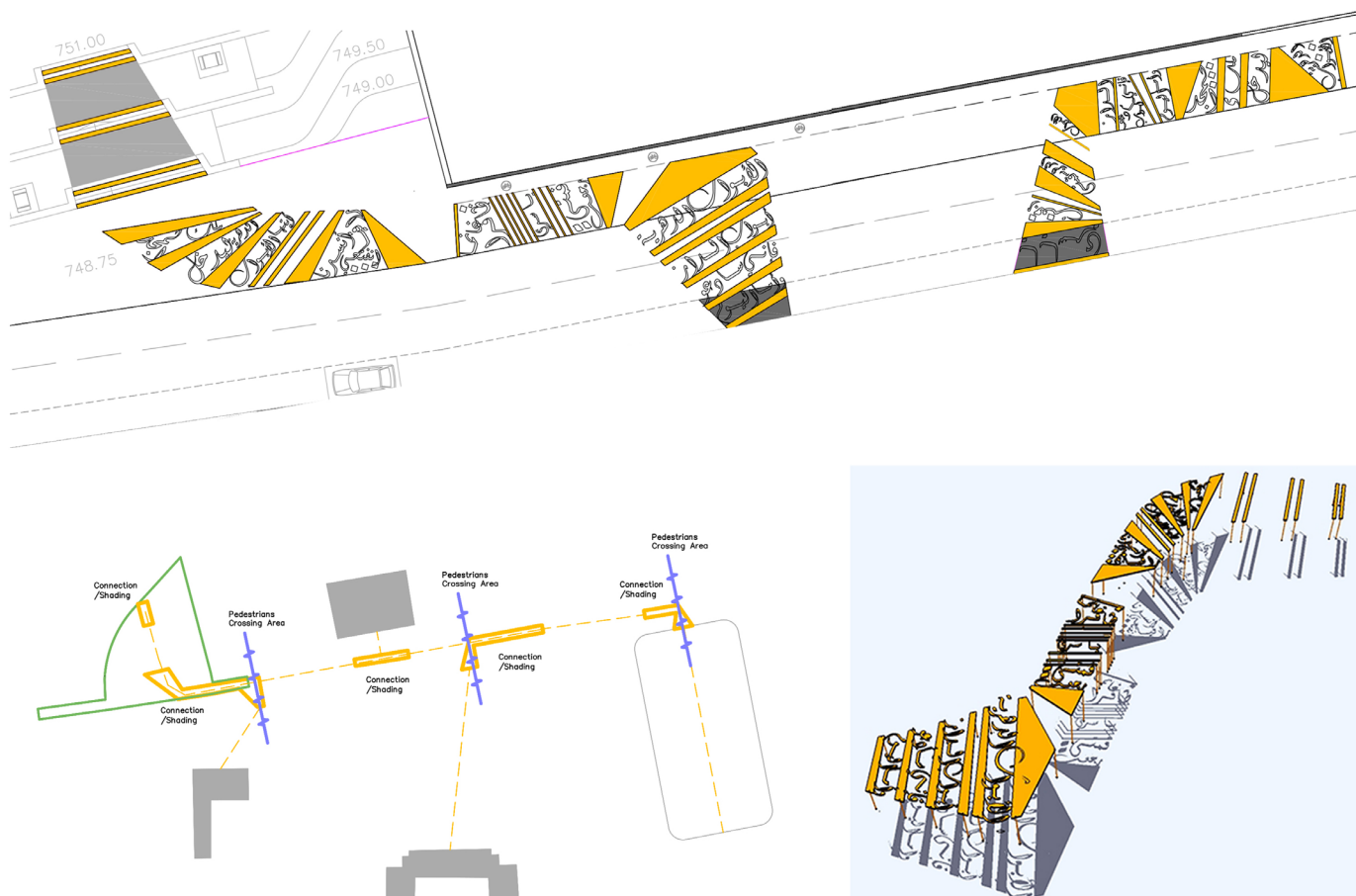
and they do not hold an Israeli citizenship. This status puts Jerusalem’s Palestinian population in a position of being ‘neither here nor there’, since they are denied some basic civil rights such as the right to vote in the national elections and the right to hold a passport. Following the outbreak of the second Intifada in the beginning of the 2000s, the state of Israel has built a new physical barrier: ‘the separation wall’ in order to prevent access from the West Bank to its sovereign territory. However the wall was built in large sections beyond the green line. ‘The Jerusalem Envelope’, as the Israeli government called the section of the wall around Jerusalem, was defined by political reasoning, creating enclaves caught between the legal boundaries (municipal and international) and the physical boundary of the wall.

A fragmented urban fabric

“Under the conditions ensuing since 1967, the definition of the borders of the city has been a matter for politicians, not urban planners. The results can be seen in the disintegrating city and its dizzying sprawl over huge areas that make any rational urban management impossible” (Meron Benvenisti)

Beit Hanina, the largest of the Arab neighborhoods within the municipal borders of Jerusalem, was built on the agricultural lands of an old village that holds the same name. The center of the old village was not included in the 1967 expansion of Jerusalem’s borders. Thus, the municipal border separated New Beit Hanina and Old Beit Hanina. Since the building of ‘the separation wall’, a physical border split the two apart. Historic routes that used to connect the two are now dead-end roads.

Like other Arab neighborhoods, Beit Hanina does not have a system of public open spaces. The few places zoned as ‘public open spaces’ are like small, scattered fragments and most of them are yet to be developed. The work presented in this essay focuses on one of these small spaces and introduces a plan to develop it in the context of the specific challenges of East Jerusalem’s urban fabric. Image 5: Above – the threshold of a private plot meeting the public street. Below – ‘The separation Wall’ dividing the urban fabric.



The In-Between Space

As a part of our studies in the Urban Design Master's Degree Program at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design Jerusalem, we were assigned to design a public playground in cooperation with Jerusalem's local municipality. The municipality offered several optional sites that it prioritized for developing for public use, all of which are located in West Jerusalem neighborhoods that already contain both playgrounds and public space in their urban domain. Considering the scarcity of playgrounds in Beit Hanina, and having heard that a group of residents from the neighborhood is trying to promote the development of public spaces for this matter, we decided to choose an alternative site for the assignment. After meeting with these residents, we focused on a site zoned as a 'public open space' surrounded by educational institutions for different age groups. To better understand the needs of the residents around this specific site, we have met the staff and students from the nearby school. Through interviews and drawing sessions with the students, we learned about how they imagine the ideal playground. Some of these drawings showed constructed playgrounds with slides, swings etc. However, many of them consisted also of the child's home and natural elements such as trees and flowers.

Before starting to design, we looked at the way collective activities are taking place within the urban fabric of Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods. We found that the streets are spaces for a wide span of social activities. In everyday, the streets are where the neighbors meet, sit and talk, and where children play together. Special occasions, such as the welcoming back of pilgrims returning from

Mecca, are often marked with graffiti and murals on the walls of the houses that face the street.

Identifying the street as the real public space, we decided to stretch the design proposal beyond the limits of the plot marked as a 'public open space' and include the street in the design.

The zoned 'public open space' is typically small. Its total area is only 1.2 dunams (0.12 hectares). Considering its modest size and its proportions, the design of the plot itself was derived from the domestic plot, including the typical units of the Arab household:

- Al Beit (the house)
- Al Saha (the courtyard)
- Al Hakura (the household garden)
- Al Jenina (the ornamental garden)
- Zeitoun (olive grove)

The heart of the plot is an abstraction of the layout of the traditional Arab house, where the private rooms are arrayed around a hall. The 'walls' are constructed by play-elements and built benches. The courtyard is the hardscape that surrounds the houses that allows informal play, while the household garden (with fruit-trees), the ornamental garden and olive groves are the softscapes that provide shaded areas for gathering and communal dining. The element connecting this domestically inspired space and the public space of the streets is what we defined as: 'Atabet Al-Bab' (Threshold) – an in-between space. This element consists of a series of doors that form a gateway to the playground. The gateway is designed using calligraphy that refers to the writings of Khalil Sakakini, thus adding an educational layer to the design.



At the Threshold of a Metaphoric Door

The design proposed in this project, suggests a new approach of planning playgrounds in East Jerusalem. It aims to create a space that features the cultural context, in contrast to the generic design of the few formal playgrounds developed so far in this part of the city. The proposal was presented to members of the community and to the municipality. Although the general responses were positive in both cases, the municipality has not developed the site. Thus, this project remains a statement; a statement about the condition of the open spaces in East Jerusalem, standing in the shadow of the seen and unseen borders that divide the city and its surroundings. In the neighborhood of Beit Hanina, the seen border - 'the separation wall' blocks the roads to Old Beit Hanina and affects the life in the streets that are the informal spaces of social interaction. While the unseen border is evident by the comparison between the neglect of Beit Hanina's 'open public spaces' as marked in official zoning plans, and the development of public spaces in the city's Jewish neighborhoods.

We believe that all residents of the city have are entitled to have at the threshold of their home, a public space that they can feel a part of, and that all children and adults should have access to places of play and informal meeting. Through this proposal, we wish to give form to the possibility a different reality, and to open a metaphoric door through the walls that currently segregate the neighborhoods of East Jerusalem.

- [1] Benvenisti, Meron, (2000), *Sacred Landscape: the buried history of the Holy Land since 1948*, University of California Press, p. 335
- [2] Wiezman, Eyal, (2007), *'Hollow Land: Israel's architecture of occupation'*, London-New York, Verso, p.10
- [3] Benvenisti, Meron (2002), 'Jerusalem Envelope', published on June 20th 2002 in *Ha'aretz* Newspaper and in *Borderlinedisorder*, the catalog for the Israeli pavilion at the 8th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2002. P. 32

Acknowledgment: The conceptual plan presented in this essay was developed as a studio project in the Urban Design Master's Degree Program at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design Jerusalem, guided by: Karen Lee Bar-Sinai, Chen Farkas, Jonathan Ventura, Enaya Banna, Idan Lederman & Hagit Zimroni.

At the threshold of a metaphoric door in 'the separation wall' - montage