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## Towards Palestinian regeneration

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With the forces of power exercising hegemony over the framing of spaces and the shaping of the built environment, a process of fragmentation can be clearly seen taking place all over the world, cutting away communities on one hand and connecting in new ways in another (Dovey, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. Such processes might be at their most visible in Palestine, yet neo-imperialism, globalization and inequality are emblematically reshaping contemporary cities everywhere. Blurred border lines are being solidified, restructuring the ways in which people can move and act, creating a network of undermined and suppressed societies left behind who are then engaged in struggles to overcome the hidden forces of state power.

In a context like the bitter conflict between Palestine and Israel, where the map is daily becoming ever more fragmented and disconnected, it is crucial for architects to define their role and explore new spatial possibilities that can reconnect spaces and communities again. Palestinians, who have been effectively stateless within their own borders ever since Israel's

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<sup>1</sup> Dovey, K., 1999. *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*. London: Routledge.

seizure of the Occupied Territories, have been put under the microscope with a lot of academic studies and critiques exploring the effect of the Israeli occupation on their land and identity. However, what is remarkable is that hardly any of those political critiques have yet discussed or even recognized the other, potentially positive, dimension of the conflict. The current hardening of the border zone not only brings destruction and division, but also exhibits new spatial and urban realities caused by the corresponding will to survive. Those who live within these fragmented areas are now introducing new social realities through their everyday activities, displaying a counter-power that is resisting the domination of power through creative tools that architecture and planning have so far failed to equal.

Hence, as a contribution against spatial marginalization of the Palestinian people, there is an urgency to search for spaces of possibility in between the fragmented maps -- spaces that will engage in the dialogue of everyday narratives by discovering invisible networks of communities who are working to overcome, adapt and redefine the meaning of the built environment. These hidden networks are drawing up the lines for new thinking in design to subvert spaces of pure oppression and change them into spaces of opportunity, so that social life can be recovered.

In this attempt to bridge the gap between the divided communities, a design team of three architects (Murray Fraser, Nasser Golzari and Yara Sharif) from the University of Westminster in central London is spearheading an innovative approach to urban reconstruction in the troubled regions of Palestine. Constituted as the Palestine Regeneration Team (PART), the aim is to carry out a range of 'live' projects which build upon everyday habits to help the local community through responsive design interventions. Realising that the limitation with most western academic analysis is its fixation with the negative aspects of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the PART team aims instead to find constructive ways to use architecture and urban design to help the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The PART team is now working directly with Palestinian institutions to rethink and promote social, spatial and environmental sustainability. In conjunction with RIWAQ<sup>2</sup>, a NGO that restores historic buildings in Palestine, the team has drawn up a scheme to regenerate the old heart of Birzeit, a university town near to Ramallah, and is now working on more detailed designs to refurbish houses in Hajja, close to Nablus. Birzeit and Hajja are both part of RIWAQ's ambitious '50 Villages' programme - announced internationally at the 2009 Venice Art Biennale - to counteract the urban problems caused by political instability and Israeli occupation.

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<sup>2</sup> RIWAQ - Centre for Architectural Conservation is a nonprofit organization located in Ramallah, whose main objective is the protection and development of architectural heritage in Palestine. (<http://www.riwaq.org/about/about.html>).

The PART team has just come back from the Gaza Strip after running a workshop with UN-Habitat on the subject of sustainable neighbourhoods, aiming to offer alternative ways to rebuild the destroyed areas of Gaza City after the assault in 2008 which has left a staggering 1.5 million people displaced in their own land. The workshop has initiated pilot projects, which build on the current initiatives of the locals to rebuild their houses using mud, crushed concrete as well as other materials. Of particular interest to the team is the exploration of 'invisible technologies' whereby relatively minor and low-cost alterations to existing dwellings and urban layouts can greatly reduce energy consumption and improve thermal comfort for inhabitants. These projects offer more theoretical and experimental ways to rethink creatively the problems created by Palestinian/Israeli borders.

Currently, PART and the University of Westminster are the only outside academic institution directly helping the Gaza people with their reconstruction work. Furthermore, PART has also set up the online Palestinian Regeneration Project Forum ([www.palestineregenerationproject.com](http://www.palestineregenerationproject.com)), a website where architects and scholars working on a whole range of projects related to Palestine can share ideas and strategies.

Between existence and coexistence there is a thin line that has managed to separate not only Palestinians from the Israelis, but also Palestinians from themselves. The question is of course whether these fractures can ever be healed again? PART definitely thinks they can, which is why they are acting. What PART is trying to do within is to erase the 'thin' invisible lines of division from the map to create the conditions for greater equality on both sides. Only then one can negotiate coexistence between Palestine and Israel. While stating this, the echoes of the last moments of apartheid in South Africa are ringing a bell in our minds.