Diary for a Portable Landscape - Part I

Sala-manca Group (Lea Mauas, Diego Rotman)

If the home is the republic, if the landscape is the language, if a temporary dwelling is the symbol of stability and a liminal identity, the painted landscape of our temporary dwelling structure may be the mythological origin or the destiny of our portable homeland.

When landscapes are erased, when homes are destroyed, when structures of symbolic homes must be smuggled in order to survive and tell their story, the home/land remain as ephemeral monuments in our memory.

Acquiring and moving temporary and fragile structures, building unauthorized replicas of structures from scratch, transporting homes in order to build an architecture of political collectivity and individual historical criticism, or creating a footnote to history, thinking through landscape, being attached to an unattached home, conceiving of the unattached homeland as the aim of a temporal and portable sovereignty.

*

These and other thoughts and questions, now articulated in words, were first formulated, constructed, dismantled and smuggled through a series of temporary dwelling structures charged with symbolic meaning of remembrance – the sukkah.

Sukkot/Sukkah

The Jewish holiday of Sukkot is one of the three holidays mentioned in the Bible during which it was customary to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem

◂ Khan al-Ahmar

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110786279-012

during the period of the First and Second Temples. The name of the holiday is the plural of the word sukkah – the huts in which the Israelites lived in the desert during their exodus from Egypt (Exodus 33:6). The holiday's relation to Jerusalem acquires additional meanings in the Bible when several of the prophets refer to the city using the term "sukkah" – see, for instance, Isaiah (1:8) and Amos (9:11).

The holiday commemorates the exodus from Egypt by means of the commandment to build sukkot (Leviticus 23:42), temporary structures topped by a covering of branches or fronds. During the holiday, one's house become a "temporary residence," while the sukkah becomes one's "permanent residence." During the holiday, Jews are commanded to sit in the sukkah where they will eat, study, and even sleep during the seven days of the holiday. One of the central customs related to the holiday is the decoration of the sukkah; these decorations lend it a festive air and are a means of expressing the identity and ideological outlook of its builders. In the ultra-Orthodox community, dominant motifs include rabbinical figures, like the seven ushpizin, or exalted guests, who are symbolically invited to the sukkah, as well as various religious symbols. Members of the national-religious community adorn their sukkahs with decorations that have a more national character, such as images of the local landscape, its fauna and flora, and the Israeli Declaration of Independence. Across most of Jewish communities Jerusalem-related symbols are always central motifs in sukkah decoration. Overall, the sukkah symbolizes the tension between a permanent residence and a temporary residence.

The Eternal Sukkah #2

In 2014, we were invited to create a public sukkah for the holiday of Sukkot in the gardens of the Hansen House for Art and Technology in Jerusalem. After a long process of research and discussion, we, together with artists

Itamar Mendes-Flohr and Yeshaiau Rabinowitz, decided rather than constructing an extravagant or innovatively designed sukkah, to delve into the sukkah's charged meaning in the Israeli context and to highlight the temporary nature of the structure and its associations with exile.

If, according to the United Nations, refugees are those who, for reasons of persecution, have been exiled and cannot return to their country, then the ancient Hebrews in the desert could, the artists argued, be understood as early refugees and their sukkot, shanties in the desert, as a refugee camp.

Our questions then were (1) how to bring an "authentic" and contemporary house from a refugee camp from today's Israel/Palestine to Jerusalem, and (2) how to turn it into a kosher, functional, and "authentic" sukkah.

We traveled to the Judean Desert in the Palestinian territories to meet the al-Korshan family of the Jahalin, a Bedouin tribe uprooted in 1948 from its lands in southern Israel and relocated to the West Bank as refugees. The al-Korshan family settled in the Khan al-Ahmar area and pastured their animals on neighboring village lands. After Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967 and, as a consequence of the establishment and expansion of Ma'ale Adumim, a nearby Jewish settlement, the Israeli army increasingly restricted tribe members' access to many of the grazing grounds.

Tribal families live in temporary structures not connected to potable water or electricity. They live in huts built with found materials: scrap metal, wood taken from construction sites, tin from water heaters, and old billboards. Roofs are mostly tin covered with plastic sheeting. All of their homes and other structures are under continuous threat of demolition by Israel's Civil Administration. Today there is a master plan for building a Bedouin town near Jericho, intended to accommodate about 12,500 people from three different tribes. But the Bedouin families oppose "the plan to cram members of different tribes and clans altogether […] in the

same space [that] runs counter to their tradition, their way of life and their livelihood."

We traveled to meet the al-Korshan family of the Jahalin tribe. We were hosted in the traditional Bedouin tent made of natural materials. We were served tea and listened to Abu Suleiman tell the Jahalin tribal story and the tribe's worries over the current threat of once again being relocated against their will. We explained our wish to connect the long-past Jewish exile to their actual exile and told them about our idea to transport a piece of one "hidden" reality to Jerusalem, where what was hidden would be made visible. We proposed buying a shanty they were then using for storage and paying €1,300 for it, money the collective had received from the Hansen House in West Jerusalem.

The Mukhtar (the head of the village) gave his blessing, arguing that this might be an opportunity to publicize their story more widely and to build a stronger and better structure. Together with the al-Korshan family, we dismantled the shanty in the dead of night to avoid detection by the Civil Administration. By the time we would start reassembling the dismantled hut as a sukkah in the Hansen House, the al-Korshan family – using the money they received – would start building a new and sturdier cabin exactly where the old one had stood.

In September 2014, the dismantled Bedouin home was transported to the center of Jerusalem as "construction waste," the "home" temporarily reverted to raw materials. This journey also manifested the tragic fact that the "home," at least as waste, can easily make its way to Jerusalem, a pilgrimage that cannot be freely undertaken by most of the Jahalin.

The Bedouin tent was reconstructed in the Hansen House gardens. Some interventions were done to refer to the relocation and make the Bedouin structure into a kosher sukkhah: the roof was exchanged for palm fronds and

the carpets with matting, while a paper decoration made by our daughter became a symbolic sukkah ornament.

At the very moment that the ephemeral architecture of the Bedouin shack changed its roof from recycled tin to fresh palm fronds, the exile of the Jahalin tribe was materialized as a Jewish sukkah, and the Jewish exile was materialized in a Bedouin cabin of a refugee family.

Jewish visitors to the Bedouin sukkah in the well-established Jewish neighborhood of Talbyeh in Jerusalem, a Palestinian neighborhood until 1948, had the opportunity to experience the Bedouin diaspora through the commemoration of the Jewish holiday. Visitors could enter the "almost real" home of a refugee family, become familiar with their story through a text, and fulfill the Jewish commandment of dwelling in a sukkah while experiencing their people's history as refugees.

The illegal Bedouin "home," originally destined for demolition, changed its status and became a legal and kosher Israeli sukkah, surviving conversion and translocation thanks to this identity. But we aimed to complete the translocation by rebuilding it inside the inner sanctum of the Israeli art discourse by selling it to The Israel Museum.

The plan generated much thinking about the meaning of such a step, including the danger of cultural colonialism, Western manipulation, and exploitation of a so-called disadvantaged or disenfranchised community. Aware of these contradictory layers, we proposed that, in any sale, half the sum would be given to the al-Korshan family as a "copyright fee" for the design. The al-Korshan family accepted the plan on condition that any exhibition of the sukkah would be accompanied by an explanatory text of the project and the tribe's role and background.

We contacted The Israel Museum curators, to try to involve the museum in

the process, adding new layers and meanings to the shanty's history. After long and heated debate, the sukkah and a short documentary film were among the pieces slated for acquisition for the Museum's permanent collection. What was formerly construction waste that was turned into a home and later a kosher sukkah would become the object in a cataloguing, conserving, and canonizing process. This process was not only directed at a work of art but also encompassed an illegal building – the first of such undertaking ever.

The sukkah was exhibited for the first time in We the People, a collective indoor exhibition curated by Rita Kersting from September 2015 till March 2016. In the temporary exhibition, the sukkah, rendered useless as a ritual space, became an art piece shown indoors. Inside it, a film documenting the process was screened and an explanatory text added. In addition, a symposium featuring Abu Suleiman, scholars, and activists was organized and held during the exhibition.

Eco-Tourism

For a few hours, the dismantled Bedouin hut in the desert left an empty space to be filled with a new and stronger cabin that same night. The new cabin became a focal point for displaying Bedouin culture and hosting tourists visiting the Bawadi eco-tourism project.

"Bawadi," as its Facebook page states, "is a Bedouin driven eco-tourism initiative offering guided hikes along the ancient shepherding routes of the West Bank, Palestine, often known only to the Bedouin […]. Bedouin youth […] continue their traditional journeys through Palestine and give voice to their story […]. Inviting guests to experience the song, the story, and the silence of the desert, Bawadi is both a vehicle for advocacy and for income generation for Bedouin youth wishing to safeguard and promote their distinct culture and traditions." Visitors would have "traditional Bedouin lunches,

dinners and overnights under the stars in local communities. […] Sharing the little-explored and spectacular landscapes, flora and fauna of Palestine's deserts with visitors is a celebration of the Bedouin's living heritage."

If, at the museum, The Eternal Sukkah became a displayed ethnographic object out of its natural context, in the Bawadi experience, the desert– the real place– becomes, in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's definition, a destination culture, an open-air museum for displaying and performing the Bedouin heritage under threat of forced exile.

Bedouin villages and heritage, whose legitimacy are unrecognized by the Israeli government, undergo a process of self-recognition, recreation, and interpretation. This process redefines Bedouin folklore and traditions through the active process of performing, textualizing, and sharing. Bawadi is not an art project: it is an activist initiative against the territorial and economic policies of the Israeli government, a counter-performance against the performance of hut demolitions.

According to Israeli law, the Jahalin do not legally own the lands where they live and do not have the right to wholesome living conditions. But, according to their own beliefs and narrative, they own the secrets of the desert and know and perform the ancient shepherding routes being converted, through this initiative, into the Bedouin heritage hiking routes. It is actually through the practice of walking or hiking that the Jahalin enact their sovereignty in the desert. They walk their heritage in order to share it, and share it in order to own it.

Bawadi hikes are part of a performative process of decolonizing, a walking practice contrary to a translocation process intended to proceed according to Israel's expansionist politics manifested in the E1 Plan for the area east of Jerusalem.

The dismantling of the Bedouin structure and the incorporation of the structure into an art storage room, was a symbolic process of archiving the revolution. It performs a secret practice of incarceration, a dystopic performance, in a hidden part of the museum.

▲ Jahalin Construction, Khan Al-Ahmar, 2014.

▲ "Eternal Sukka", Sala-Manca, Itamar Mendes-Flohr, Yeshaiahu Rabinowitz in collaboration with Al-Korshan family, Hansen House, 2014.

▲ "Eternal Sukka", Sala-Manca, Itamar Mendes-Flohr, Yeshaiau Rabinowitz in collaboration with Al-Korshan family, The Israel Museum, 2016.