The Separation Wall in Palestine: Artists Love to Hate It

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Since the beginning of the building of the separation barrier by the Israeli government in the Palestinian territories, dozens of artistic projects and art works have been created documenting, responding, criticizing, and condemning the wall. The barrier has been a main focus of political art in the last few years triggering many artistic projects and tactics against its construction. The projects and works come from artists from many disciplines: photographers, painters, video artists, performance, graffiti writers, conceptual artists, architects, as well as political activists and local residents fighting for their own land. The constriction of the “separation Wall” is highly controversial and artistic projects dealing with it raise many dilemmas. What role do these practices play? What are their limitations and potentialities? How these practices are used; on one hand, to reduce the damage of the wall, or on the other, to attempt to raise awareness of the harm of the wall or participate in the political struggle against it? What positive role can art have in this political construction project? And why are so many artists attracted to do work on this Wall?

Barrier, Wall, Separation Fence

Israel’s “barrier,” “wall,” or “separation fence” across the West Bank is an architectural expression of a twenty-year old political strategy (Weizman) and although the wall is the greatest construction project ever built by the state of Israel, no architects were involved in its construction.¹ The wall was built by engineers subcontracted by the Israeli defense ministry. At the fourth convention of the Israel Architects Association, Architect Gideon Harlap complained that no architects were involved in designing the separation fence. The fence, he says, is not beautiful, like the Great Wall of China, but is clumsy and ugly, and architects could have

contributed to its aesthetic design had they been allowed to participate in its planning in time (Gilerman).

The wall is part of a physical barrier consisting of a network of fences with vehicle-barrier trenches surrounded by wide exclusion area averaging 60 meters (90%) and concrete walls up to eight meters high. Most of the barrier (over 95% of its total length) consists of a “multi-layered fence system” ideally 50 meters in width. The Israeli military’s preferred design has three fences, with pyramid-shaped stacks of barbed wire for the two outer fences and a lighter-weight fence with intrusion detection equipment (controlled by a command and control system built by Elbit Ltd.) in the middle. Patrol roads were mounted on both sides of the middle fence, as well as an anti-vehicle ditch that was dug on the “Palestinian” side of the fence with a smooth dirt strip on the Israeli side for “intrusion tracking.”

Some sections (less than 5% of the total length) are constructed as a wall made up of concrete slabs up to eight meters high and three meters wide. Occasionally, due to topographic conditions, other sections of the barrier will reach up to 100 meters in width. Wall construction (5%) is more common in urban settings, such as areas near Qalqilyah and Jerusalem, because it is narrower, requires less land, and provides more protection against snipers. In all cases, there are regular observation posts, automated sensing devices, and other technological apparatus. Gates at various points are manned by Israeli soldiers. The total length, as officially authorized, will be 650 kilometers (403 miles).

The barrier is a highly controversial project. Supporters claim the barrier is a necessary tool protecting Israeli civilians from Palestinian terrorism, including suicide bombing attacks in buses and bus stations, shopping centers, stores, restaurants, and other public places, which has increased significantly since the al-Aqsa Intifada. The Israeli defense ministry argues that the wall has helped reduce incidents of terrorism by 90% from 2002 to 2005.

Opponents claim that the barrier is an illegal attempt to annex Palestinian land under the guise of security; violates international law; has the intent or effect of preempting final status negotiations; and severely restricts Palestinians who live nearby, particularly obstructing ability to travel freely within the West Bank and to access work in Israel, thereby undermining their economic, social, political, and cultural life. Although the wall might decrease the number of terrorist attacks for the present, its devastating effect could encourage much more violence and bloodshed in the future.

“Beautifying” the Wall

The most common documented and recognized element of the separation barrier is the eight meter high concrete wall with its armed watchtowers. Its physical presence is both threatening and haunting, but also strong and powerful. It is clear why both supporters and opponents of the wall choose this very small part of the project as