

# Reinventing Lifta

By Malkit Shoshan and Eitan Bronstein

*The Jewish state uses Jerusalem to define itself in the ever expanding city. All buildings, including new ones, have to be made of stone in order to show the eternal Jewish presence, in this process Jerusalem's Palestinian past is being appropriated.*

*Malkit Shoshan, director of FAST (the Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory), and Eitan Bronstein, director of Zochrot, examine the ways in which planning is being used to create this fantasy heritage for Israel, at the expense of Palestinian culture.*

*"Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration."*

- UNESCO

In Israel, renovation projects are frequently used in order to build a national narrative, ignoring the deep contradictions between planning and human rights that inevitable become apparent in such initiatives. Lifta, like the 'unrecognised village' of Ein Hud, is a potent symbol of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its tragic human consequences. The 'unofficial' Palestinian village of Ein Hud was built by refugees fleeing the original Ein Hud nearby; Israeli artists later colonized the old village, renaming it Ein Hod. The new Ein Hud's struggle for legitimacy (and the planning system's refusal to grant this) was the subject of FAST's recent architecture competition.

The village of Lifta, which lies just outside Jerusalem, has been abandoned since the Israeli army drove out the last of its Palestinian inhabitants in 1948. Today Lifta is more or less a ghost town. While the former villagers live mainly in East Jerusalem and Ramallah; . Now, however, a renovation project aims to turn Lifta into an expensive and exclusive Jewish residential area – reinventing its history in the process.

While Ein Hud and Lifta are historically and spatially unique, they are both symbols of the deep complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began not with the occupation of 1967, but with the creation of Israel in 1948. Viewing the history and transformation of each, from Palestinian village to the realization of a utopian ideology of a modern society and nation, reveals much about the conflict, and how planning tools are fundamental in making the transition.



One nation – Israel – is being invented through national narratives and ethos, through culture, language, image, history and space, another nation – Palestine – is being brutally negated.

It is essential to study this transformation process, from land confiscation to the displacement of one group and accommodation of another, the role of master planning, zoning, programming, planting, demolishing, fencing, and so on. Only in becoming fully aware of this process can we actively realign our profession to create viable alternatives.

As with Ein Hud, we aim to explore the possibilities for an alternative planning solution, for Lifta.

The renovation of Lifta should take into consideration not just the esthetic history of the village but also its human component.

In contrast with Ein Hud, in Lifta we have the opportunity to offer an alternative before a new order has been imposed, making it subsequently harder to achieve an equal solution.

The alternative to Lifta's official renovation plans will therefore be the result of activism and planning.

*The project for Lifta is an initiative of Zochrot, the Israeli not-for-profit organization that seeks to commemorate and discuss the Naqba (1) (the Palestinian 'Catastrophe') in Hebrew; to witness what was wiped off the face of the earth in order to understand Palestinian pain and loss; to acknowledge the catastrophes of 1948 and 1967 and thereby form a peace-seeking Jewish-Israeli consciousness. The architecture faculty at Bezalel Art and Design Academy, Jerusalem, and FAST, the Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory takes architecture and planning as the basis of a strategy to overcome the conflict of causality, finding methods to expose the abuses of planning and to implement the legal and the practical, localising an agenda beyond research, theory and design and with the participation of the Amsterdam based architect Micha de Haas and the architecture faculty of TU Delft.*

## The Lifta legacy

In its present derelict, largely abandoned state, Lifta captures the moment of destruction

of Palestinian life in 1948, when Israeli forces conquered it. Lifta's 2,000 villagers fled – mostly to East Jerusalem and the Ramallah area. However, unlike many of the 530 Palestinian villages and towns also conquered and usually bulldozed during the war, many of Lifta's 450 houses remained untouched; yet the village was never 'officially' resettled. Unlike Ein Hud (which later became Ein Hod), Jewish settlers did not inhabit Lifta. This does not mean that all the original houses remained vacant. Several Jewish families did move (illegally) into former Palestinian homes. Some of these families have been living there for a number of decades, and seem to have become permanent residents. In another part of the village, people from the fringes of society have settled: drug addicts and dealers, run-away teenagers, as well as nature freaks. Even so, several dozen houses, some now falling apart, have remained empty. They stand as monuments marking the events that took place here during the 1948 War.

Over the years, Lifta has remained a different and unique place, for several reasons. Geographically, it is part of the 'new' West Jerusalem; however, it represents and symbolizes the architecture and the topography of Palestinian towns. Lifta remained in its place, as if frozen in time. Topographically, it is located lower than its surroundings; this gives the feeling that Lifta somehow exists beneath the surface of the city. It seems to occupy a different level of history, geography and society. Those who have inhabited Lifta since 1948 are the 'other,' in the context of the larger Israeli public. They live outside the borders of law and order, and even outside our vision, since they usually go about their shady business down below, near the village's fountain.

As mentioned already, Lifta is unique in that, unlike many other



villages, its houses remained almost intact, yet without being inhabited by Jews as part of the Zionist enterprise. Many of Lifta's refugees live today in East Jerusalem, not far from their village. This is not unique to Lifta, as refugees often live in close proximity to their pre-1948 towns and villages. (2) However, Lifta is distinctive in that many of its original inhabitants are not citizens of Israel, but rather East Jerusalem residents, who have limited civil status.

### The masterplan

Now, a new development plan intends to turn Lifta into exclusive real estate. The plan would transform the village into an expensive living area, with some shops, a hotel and open green areas, while at the same time maintaining its village atmosphere and keeping some of its original buildings and structures. The plan was submitted to the Jerusalem Municipality Planning Committee in 2004 and was approved by a regional committee.

Reading this plan, together with an earlier development plan from the 1980s, consistent attitudes are revealed in plans for reshaping abandoned Palestinian villages. It is of great significance that the plan does not ignore the many remains of the Palestinian village; on the contrary, these are deconstructed and become a central element of the new design, with dozens of them earmarked for preservation. In addition, the natural scenery of the place - the spring, trees, and terraces - are a major component of the plan, which strives to preserve the authentic surroundings of Lifta.

Israeli authorities took part in creating the plan, and also gave it an official approval, and for this reason it is informative to observe the connection between state ideology and planning. Lifta has been partially in ruins since it was conquered in 1948. The lands belonging to it were confiscated by the state. However, the centre of the village was never rebuilt. Today, there are some 55 Palestinian houses remaining from the original 450, some standing

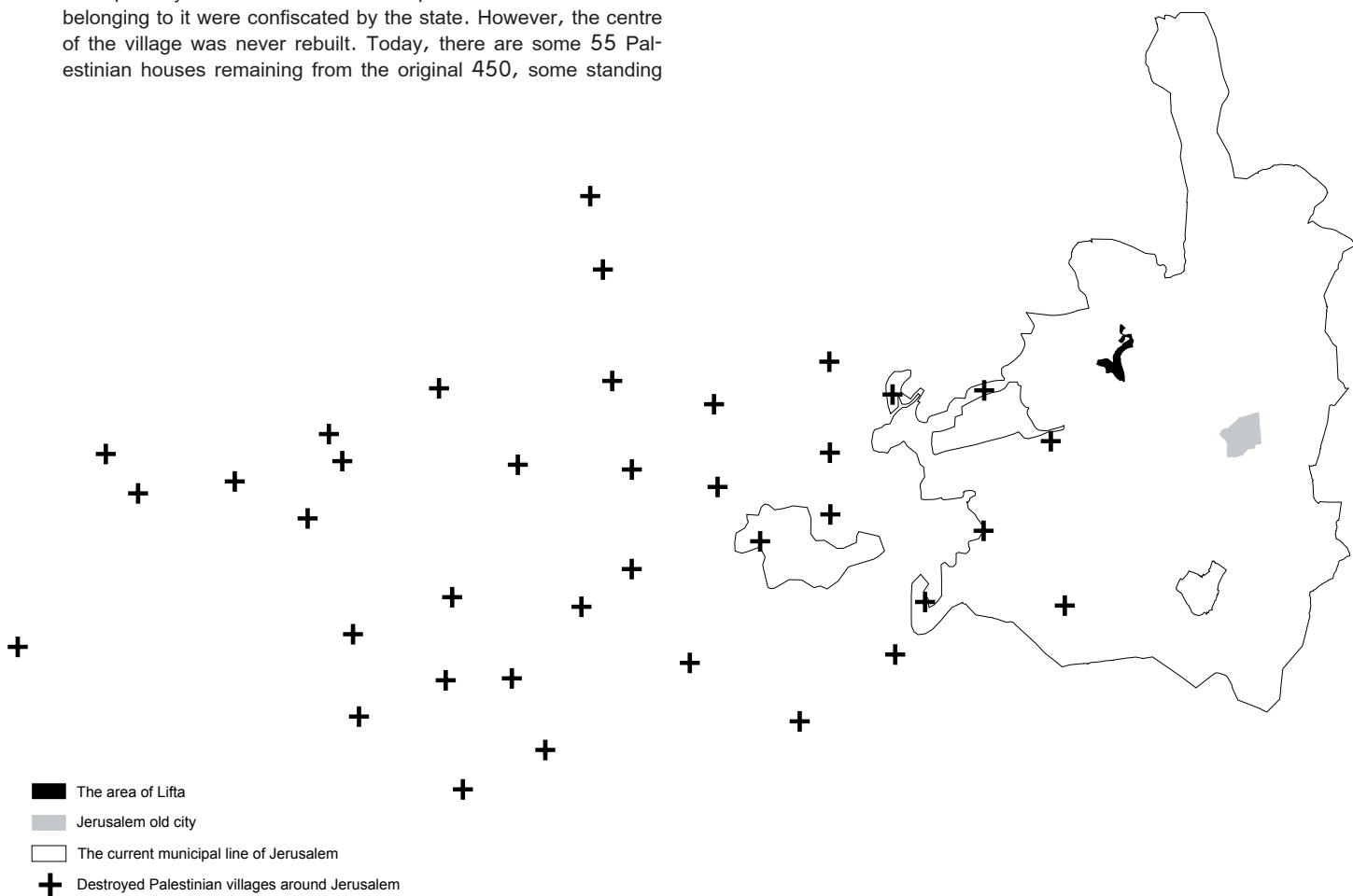
intact while others are almost entirely derelict. Several houses - those closest to the road leading to Jerusalem - were occupied decades ago, by Jewish families who still live there. These families apparently will not be evacuated when the new construction plan is implemented.

The plan essentially focuses on reshaping the space of Lifta's village centre, the surroundings of the famous spring, and the bottom part of the wadi, the ravine on whose slopes Lifta is situated. The plan, numbered 6036, was designed by two architect offices: G. Kartas - S. Grueg and S. Ahronson, and is part of the "local space planning of Jerusalem."

The plan was submitted on June 28, 2004, and according to its title refers to "The Spring of Naftoach (Lifta)." The plan includes a change to the previous construction plans for the area.

### Desirable relicts

The plan's goal, as stated in the document, is to build residential areas, some of them preserving the original houses that still exist in the village centre. It includes plans to build areas for commerce, shops, public buildings, a hotel, and passages. In addition, some part of the scenery will remain untouched for the public to enjoy. The total area to be included in the plan is 455 dunams (45,000 square metres). Some 50 houses located before 1948 in the centre of the Palestinian village will be preserved. A total of 243 housing units will be built, as well as a 120-room hotel.(3) The relations between the masterplan and the Palestinian village of Lifta are various; in the plan's goals it specifies: "instructions on how to preserve, restore and reconstruct the existing structures and the terraces inside the village of Lifta, and their integration



with the new developments in the area.” In the chapter about “A particular residential area to be preserved,” these references can be found: “any additional building or reconstruction or renovation of houses in these areas will be conducted by maintaining the architectural nature of the existing structures that are destined to be preserved, including their building scale and architectural details, and by keeping and completing the distinctive fabric of that area.”; and “there will be no changes in the level of the lands and the terraces; no damage will be caused to trees, apart from when paving access routes and shops; while “the construction work of preserving, restoring and expanding will only be done reusing old stones”.

On “areas for institutions,” the plan states that “construction will be carried out using natural square stones chiselled manually. Building with stone that has not been chiselled is forbidden.

On the terraces, it says: “All the existing terraces ... are to be preserved and restored ... Terraces that are to be restored will be created using stones similar to the existing ones”

On detailing “conditions for building permits”, the plan says that it will be required to hand in “a document that includes detailed instructions ... for preventing destruction of structures for preservation, careful detailing of the greenery in the area, and explaining the methods of construction to be used so that the existing vulnerable fabric is not harmed”.

On the trees in the area, it says: “Those trees that are located in the areas of buildings, roads and infrastructures are meant to be preserved and uprooting them is forbidden”.

On the “particular residential area for preservation,” a previous construction programme for Lifta is mentioned. Dating back to April 11, 1984, plan number 2351 is still to be implemented as part of the new plan, excluding specific articles that contradict the newer plan. Plan 2351 was never realized, but looking at its instructions regarding the preservation of Lifta’s remains is important for our topic. The goals of the previous plan were that inside the village area there would be “museums, shows, offices, and institutions that care for nature, landscape and that place.” It included “instructions for preserving the village, the orchard and the spring”; It insisted that, “the area designated to be preserved and renovated shall remain open to the public. Usages in that area that would involve closing it off to the general public will not be approved. Fencing the area selected to be restored is also forbidden.”

In addition, “in the area of the nature reserve, it will be allowed to conduct actions needed for preserving the nature and landscape of the spring and its immediate surroundings, the agricultural steps and the orchard; it will also be permissible to renovate the existing structures in the area of the nature reserve - these building can be used only as museums and study rooms”. On “buildings to be preserved,” the plan mentions three olive oil process structures and two halls dating back to the time of the Crusades. This are to be renovated, and “any archaeological findings there are not be harmed”.



## Places without people

According to this view, the remains of Lifta exist in the landscape and should be preserved. The trees, spring, terraces, natural stone, remaining houses (complete and incomplete), and the olive oil press structures are all originally from Lifta. They even have character, like “distinctive texture” and a unique “architectural nature.”

The plans are thus not in denial concerning the Palestinian space of the village. On the contrary, they are aware of its advantages and use them, through the practices of preservation, to elevate the touristic and commercial real-estate value of the project.

This comes across clearly in the earlier master plan (plan 2351), which stresses that “the area which is subject to directives of preservation and renovation is to remain open to the public.” Those who will visit the place, and not Lifta’s residents alone, will be able to enjoy the remains of the renovated village, and access to it will not be denied in any way. The aesthetics and the architecture of the Palestinian ruins raise the value of this space, and therefore will be professionally safeguarded. The “natural” stone – and not the “smooth, chiselled stone” – is the building material allowed in that area, so the nature of the materials used is preserved. The landscape with the terraces will be preserved, as will the trees. Those trees that will have to be uprooted will be re-rooted within the area included in the construction plan.

The approach to this space treats it as though it were almost sacred. It is a kind of effort to revive the village after 56 years of destruction, negligence, and natural decay. Lifta is to be reconstructed from its old materials. It is to be rebuilt around its historic core, as if the centre can somehow radiate the authentic spirit of the place. It seems that in the eyes of the planners, the larger,

newer Lifta will be a kind of duplication of the preserved kernel of Lifta’s original houses. Therefore, all of the area included in the plan will be built in the original architectural manner. You could say that Lifta is to be not only preserved, but also replicated - many times over. The wasteland that now exists in most of the area slated for renovation will bloom and be filled with the housing of a new and successful real estate project. The kernel that stood ashamed and battered will be renovated on all its sides. Here the greater Lifta will be established, a neighbourhood that will provide a great quality of life for the country’s wealthy people.

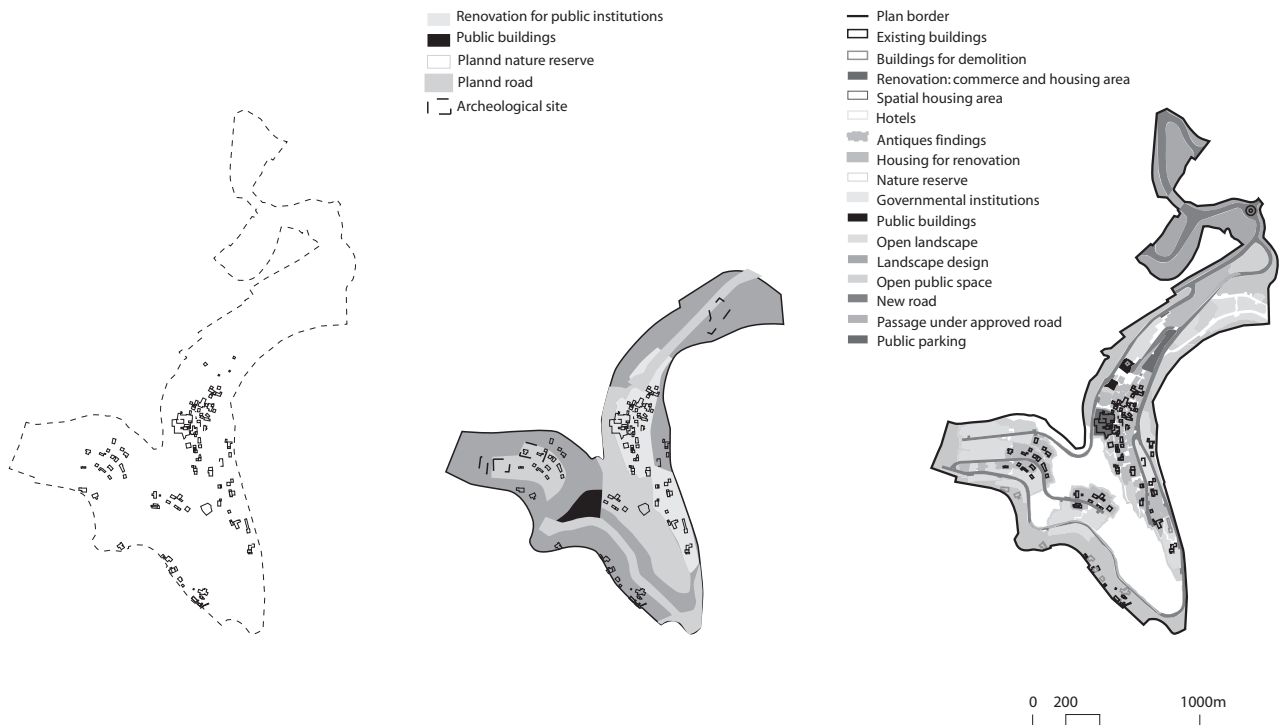
Here, we can see not only the familiar “making the desert bloom” typology, of building where nothing once stood, but also the expansion of constructed Israeli areas: an expansion that does not overlook the history of this place, the terraces, trees, houses, spring, etc. Not only is one Lifta being rebuilt. but several duplicated Liftas will from now on exist down in the wadi, right below the western entrances to the capital.

And that’s where it ends. The original Palestinian inhabitants of Lifta are nowhere to be found in the plans. Those who created and cultivated this space, their memories of the village, their exile and longing to return are not mentioned at all. Only a deconstruction of the plan reveals how they were removed. Two thousands of the village’s refugees, who are missing from the plan to rebuild Lifta, live within few kilometres of their lost village. They are not part of the construction plan; or rather, they are only part of the hidden element of these plans, the element that should categorically not be taken into consideration. They are too close to be a part of it.

Existing buildings  
(based on plan n.6036)

The previous renovation plan for Lifta  
drawing based on plan n.2351

The renovation plan for Lifta  
drawing based on plan n.6036



## Lives overlooked

The refugees are still here, together with their descendants, their memories, and their desire that the injustices done to them be acknowledged and repaired. All this, it seems, cannot be part of the new construction plan of Lifta. It is like a bomb that vaporises the human beings but causes no damage to the buildings they once lived in. Humanity is separated from Lifta, and only a mixture of materials remains there. Turning Lifta into a high-class neighbourhood will also eliminate the marginal culture that developed there, as it is one of those values that a proper Western environment cannot tolerate.

Hirschfield interprets the establishing of the artists' village of Ein Hod as a similar action, in which blindness rules the approach towards the destruction of Palestinian life. The "naivety of Israeli painting led a group of painters to come and reside inside the object of their paintings. They came to dwell inside the 'beauty' of Israeli art which contained within its development process the emptiness and destruction that were at its very basis." (4)

This is not just an act of "making the desert bloom" as far as the settlers were concerned, or an act of overlooking the end of the lives which existed before them. Their attitude and action negates the previous human life that existed here. The Palestinians who lived in Lifta and Ein Hud (before it was renamed Ein Hod) are robbed of their identity by the Zionist settlement venture: nothing was there that we need to face today, let alone in the future. Ein Hod was built, as Lifta will be, on 'beautiful' ruins that have no humanity left in them. "Making the desert bloom" is a discursive mechanism through which the lives lived prior to the Zionist enterprise in the country become a mere "mental desert" in Jewish-Israeli awareness.

Yigal Tzalmona sees a similar trend in the paintings of Gutman and Rubin. The country's landscape, with its Palestinian villages, "carries the characters of the Orient without the presence of its indigenous people. The accepted Zionist perception of the Land of Israel from the turn of the 20th century until the 1920s was embodied in its image as a desolate land, which the Jews who returned to it will turn into a flourishing land." (5)

"The Palestinian village itself, as seen, for example, in Rubin's portrait of the sculptor Melnikov, becomes the scenery and backdrop in pictures showing portraits of strong, rooted Jews, connected to nature, to the landscape, to the mountain and to the village – as a sign of indigenouness. The village is empty (of people) specifically because it plays a role as a mark. The Orientals – in this case, the inhabitants of the village – are not needed in the scene, because the human dimension is already realized through the presence of a real person, the portrait of a particular person, a man with a name, a Jew. In the descriptions of the Orient in the 1920s, there is an elevation of the Orient's features, but without identifying or concretizing with these features through true intimacy." (6)

Similarly, in the construction plans for Lifta, the village's houses and material remnants function as a natural environment, as a local and Oriental nature whose aesthetics should be benefitted from. This plan is not disconnected in its approach to space from other cultural manifestations of Zionism. In this plan, the void created by the lack of a human, Palestinian, presence is filled by Jewish settlers. One clear expression of this is the plan to build a Jewish synagogue in Lifta (chapter 14, article 1, "area designated for public buildings"). There is also a plan to build a museum there, but there is no sign that the local Palestinian history will be made part of the exhibits.

One blunt testimony to the eradication of the human in Lifta's construction plan is the absence of Palestinian cemeteries. In plan 6036, the cemeteries don't appear at all. They also don't appear in the detailed cartographic map (1:2,500) that was submitted with the plan. In construction plan 2351, from 1984, the cemeteries are not to be found in the written plan, but are located in the cartographic map. According to the current plan, a "specially preserved residential area" is to be built on the cemeteries. There is no recognition of their presence in that area. So not only are the living refugees, who were forced to leave the village in 1948, absent from the plan, but even the dead who remained in Lifta are not to be mentioned in any way. Once again, preservation applies only to buildings, trees, terraces and landscape, but not to the people, dead or alive, who used to live in Lifta. (7)

### *Challenging creativity*

*In a situation where state ideology is rooted in each plan and masterplan, creating an alternative to the governmental plans is not enough.*

*Our creativity needs to come through the different ways we choose to expose these stories of urgency and through these various means we can succeed in engaging our colleagues worldwide in the design process.*

*The story of Ein Hud was told through a worldwide architecture competition (8).*

*Renovating Lifta is a project through which we hope to engage the worldwide academic community once more.*

*We would like to use this platform to invite architecture, planning, renovation, and preservation faculties to participate in creating a plan for Lifta and submit the results to us. They will be exhibited in Israel in the summer of 2006.*

*More information can be found soon at [www.seamless-israel.org](http://www.seamless-israel.org)*

*Malkit Shoshan is an Israeli architect and the director of FAST, the Foundation of Achieving Seamless Territory, which aims at exposing the hidden dimensions of planning and offering alternative solutions.*

*Eitan Bronstein is founder and director of Zochrot since 2001. Eitan Bronstein is working for more than 20 years in political education. He has a masters degree in cultural criticism from Bar Ilan University. He is investigating the Israeli landscape in relation to the destruction of the Palestinian villages from 1948*

(1) Naqba or Al-Naqba: this term, which means "the Catastrophe," refers to the expulsion of the Palestinian people from Israel as a result of the 1948 war.

(2) Perhaps the best example for this is the refugees of Safuria. Some 15,000 refugees (and their descendants) live in crowded conditions in a neighborhood in Nazareth called Safafra (named after the village.) Though they live today only several kilometers from their lands, they are not allowed to return to it.

(3) Shviki, Itsik; Lifta, The Picturesque Village [http://www.shimur.co.il/vf/ib\\_items/1273/lifta.doc](http://www.shimur.co.il/vf/ib_items/1273/lifta.doc)

(4) Hirschfield, P. 22.

(5) Tzalmona, Yigal; "Eastward! Eastward? On the East in the Israeli Art", in "in Exhibition catalog; Kadima – The East in Israeli Art, Tzalmona Yigal and Manor-Fridman Tamar (Curators), The Israeli Museum, Jerusalem, 1998. P. 58.

(6) Tzalmona. P. 59.

(7) Nonetheless, two Jewish families living illegally in the village area were allowed to stay put. During a debate regarding objections submitted over the first construction plan (No. 2351) it was decided to allow Mrs Yekutieli and the Sofer family to continue living in building "in an area which is designated to be an 'open view area', allowing them to use it as a residency and a studio..." The committee that responded to the objections actually legalized their residency in the place, even though they don't have an original attachment to this specific village as Lifta's Palestinian refugees do.

(8) See online exhibition of the competition results at [www.onelandtwosystems.com](http://www.onelandtwosystems.com); more information and updates at [www.seamless-israel.org](http://www.seamless-israel.org)