THE ISRAELI - PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, THE BOTANICAL VERSION.

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Introduction: A Divided Land

"….Is there in this land
A stone that was never thrown
And never built and never overturned
And never uncovered and never discovered
...And never closed on top of a grave and never lay under lovers?"
(From "Temporary Poem of My life" by Yehuda Amichai. Translation: Barbara and Benjamin Harshav)

Indeed, as Amichai suggests in his poem, the constant building and demolition that this land has known for centuries, has affected all aspects of the landscape.
But what is this land known as Israel/Palestine?
In physical and geographical terms, the land that I will speak of in this paper is a single land. It stretches from the Galilee Mountains in the north to the Red Sea in the south. On the west it is bound by The Mediterranean while on the east it is bound by the Jordan River. But, in political and cultural terms, this land is far from being one uniform entity. Throughout the ages, the different national and religious groups that have dominated this land have constantly changed its political borders, its name, its culture and even its landscape.
This text focuses on the two major nationalities that share this land today: the Palestinian and the Israeli, and the on going conflict between them. Since the land is claimed by two nationalities, to choose one name to describe the land, would mean to ignore the complexity of this situation. That is why I chose to describe this one land in various terms. To make these terms clear, let me point out the major events that have changed the political borders of this land during the Israeli Palestinian conflict.
This conflict took roots when the land was under Ottoman rule, and deepened during the time of British Mandate. The name *"Palestina"* refers in this text to the land in the period prior to 1948, since that was the land's official name under British rule.
The war of 1948 was a major turning point in the history of this conflict. As a result of this war the land was split in three, The State of Israel and the Palestinian territories: the west bank (under Jordanian control) and the Gaza Strip (under Egyptian control), divided by a border known as "the green line".
Although a political border split the land, the word "Israel" is still used by Israelis, and the word "Palestine" is still used by Palestinians, to describe this land as a whole. In order to emphasize this duality, I chose the expression *"Israel/Palestine"* to describe the land since 1948.
19 years later, another dramatic change came upon the land. During the war of 1967 Israel took over the Palestinian territories, which became subject to the military ruling of the Israeli Defense Force.
In 1994 The Palestinian National Authority was formed, as a result of the Oslo Accords. The Palestinian Authority governs the major cities of the Palestinian territories.
The dramatic events described above had tremendous impact on all aspects of the landscape. Towns and villages were destroyed, others were built, fences were put up and taken down, roads were blocked, and detouring roads were paved. The botanical aspects of the landscape had also changed: woodland had been burned during wars; trees were cut

down to make way for military operations; agricultural land was neglected after its owners were forced into exile. But besides describing the direct impact of the conflict on the vegetation, this text aims to examine two important connections between the landscape and the conflict.
The first goal of this text is to examine the references to the botanic inventory in Israeli and Palestinian art & poetry. By doing so, I would like to shed light on the way the same landscape can be interpreted differently, according to the national and political point of view, and to show how the representation of the flora serves as a metaphoric representation of the conflict.
The second goal is to emphasize the active part that landscaping plays in the conflict. Actions such as: planting or uprooting or preferring one species over the other, made their impact on the conflict. By showing that, I wish to join W.J.T Mitchell's call to "think of landscape not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed".[1]
This text focuses on three different botanical features that reflect these multiple relations between the landscape and the conflict.

Sabra (*Opuntia*)
The word "saber" in Arabic means cactus, a name probably derived from the Arabic word "sabr" which means patience. The word is often used specifically to describe the cactus that grows the fruit known as prickly pear. This cactus is originally from the American continents. It was imported by the Spaniards, possibly in the 16th century. From Spain it spread to other parts of Mediterranean. The sabara is said to have been in use in this part of the Middle East for approximately two hundred years, and was widely used in the Palestinian villages, mainly to mark the boundaries of agricultural lots.
Even though it is an imported species, The Zionist Jews that immigrated to Palestina, saw the sabra as part of the local landscape. As such, the sabra soon became a metaphor for the "local" Jew, born in Palestina. The sabra was also chosen to symbolize the "New Jew" because of its physical characteristics. Its thorns are a metaphor for this character's adoption of a "rough" Image, one that was in contrast to the "soft" European "Old Jew". In his book: "The Sabra: the creation of the new Jew", Israeli sociologist Oz Almog, claims that the widespread use of the word "Sabra" as a generic term for the generation of native-born Israelis began in the 1930s. This expression grew so popular, that it soon became part of the Hebrew language. The Hebrew- English Oxford Dictionary defines the Hebrew word "Sabar" (n.) as: "cactus; prickly pear; *Sabra* (native born Israeli)" and the Hebrew word "Sabari" (adj.) as: "characteristic of native born Israeli".
The myth of the young "sabar" has numerous representations in Israeli culture. One of the most famous is the caricature image of "Srulik" (a nickname of the name "Israel") created by the Israeli caricaturist Kariel Gardos. Srulik is a young Sabar who represents the state of Israel, similar to Uncle Sam's symbolizing of the United States of America (Figure 1-left).
Even though the use of the metaphor of the sabara became so popular in the Israeli culture, the use of this plant in gardening and agriculture was not common in the new Jewish settlements. It remained a characteristic of Arab- Palestinian Villages until 1948.
The war of 1948 changed the face of the land. This war, referred to in Israel as "The Independence War", is known in Palestinian history as the *Nakba* (disaster), to mark the catastrophe of the demolition of Palestinian villages and the exile of their inhabitants, in this war. In his book, all "All That Remains" the Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi maps 418 Palestinian villages and hamlets that were demolished by the Israeli state during the 1948 war and in the years following.
After the Nakba, when most of what was left of these villiges was rubble, the durable nature of the sabra helped it survive in the harsh conditions of the ruins. 61 years later, the sabra bushes are still living and thriving on the derelict ground, sometimes serving as the only landmark that serves as evidence for the existence of the ruined village that lay beneath them. The Palestinian political leader Azmi Bishara describes the state of these ruins: "The villages that no longer exist were forced out of public awareness, away from the signposts of

[1] From the Introduction to: Mitchell, W.J.T "Landscape and Power"- see literature list.

memory….but traces (of their past) were left behind, like the sabr bushes or the stone fences or bricks from a demolished house."[2]
This remarkable phenomenon was spotted by both Palestinian and Israeli artists, and the sabra soon became an Icon of these ruined villages. An early example can be found in the work of the Israeli artist Dani Karavan, "Abandoned Still Life", from 1955 (Figure 1-middle). But despite becoming a symbol of the Nakba, the Sabra remained an icon of Israel. Palestinian artist Asim Abu Shakra, who studied and worked in Israel, beautifully illustrated the paradox of this dual symbol in a series of paintings of a sabra in a pot. The sabra taken from the land and put in a pot symbolizes Abu Shakra's inner conflict as a Palestinian who lives and works within Israeli society (Figure 1-right).
Why did the Israeli culture continue to see the Sabra as an Israeli symbol after it became a symbol of the Nakba? This can be understood by examining the way the ruined Palestinian villages are characterized in Israeli culture. In her book "Erased from Space and Consciousness: Depopulated Palestinian Villages in the Israeli-Zionist Discourse" the Israeli researcher Noga Kadman, examined the way the ruined villages are described in Israeli National Parks brochures & signs. Kadman shows that the ruins are often described as part of the serene nature & pastoral landscape.
This romantic attitude towards the ruined landscape is shared by some Israeli landscape architects. An example of this is the use of Sabra bushes in the landscaping of the controversial Cross-Israel Highway. In several places the highway was built near, or even on top of ruined Palestinian villages. The road's landscape architects chose to "connect to the surrounding landscape" by creating on the side of the road pseudo ruined landscapes, using flora typical to ruins of Palestinian villages, and most notably, the Sabra bushes. This form of landscaping ignores the actual history of the ruins, and turns it into merely a stereotypic landform. As a "highway beatification" element, the Sabra makes a macabre décor to a project accused of environmental, social & political injustice.

The Pine Forest
Until the 20th century, pine trees where a rare sight in the landscapes of Palestina.
They were found mostly in the gardens of monasteries and churches. In the natural landscape there were only several groups of pines, of the species Pinus halepensis and Pinus pinea.
The domination of the pine trees in the Israeli/Palestinian landscape is linked directly with the Zionistic organization: The "Jewish National Fund" (JNF), which was founded in 1901 in order to purchase land for the future Jewish State. To mark the ownership over the land it had purchased, the JNF took the action of planting forests. Since its foundation the JNF has planted more than 240 million trees, on an area of over 250,000 acres.
For many years, pine trees, mostly of imported species, were the most dominant in the inventory of plants chosen by the JNF to be planted in these forests. Among those, the most popular was the Cyprus pine (Pinus brutia).
Why had the JNF chosen this foreign tree over native species? Israeli architect Michael Chyutin claims that the Zionists that came to Palestina from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th century "rebelled against the traditional religious culture and saw secularism as a way of life". In contrast to Biblical command: "When you enter the land and plant any tree for food…" (Lev. 19:23-25), the "New Jews", as they saw themselves, chose to import "new flora", "which consisted of shade providing "fruitless" trees suited the new immigrants' memories of the land of their childhood…"[3]
The connection between the new pine forests planted in Palestina by the Zionists, and the landscapes of their birthplace in Eastern Europe, was beautifully expressed by the Hebrew poet, Leah Goldberg. In her poem "Pine", Goldberg, who was born in East Prussia and immigrated to Palestina, wrote of the two lands she regarded as "homeland":

[2] Bishara, "Between Place and Space"- see literature list.

[3] Chyutin, "The Biblical, the Jewish, the Zionistic, the Hebrew, the Secular, the Cnaanist and the Converted: Seven Metamorphoses of Landscape in Search of an Author"-see literature list.

"PINE

Here I will not hear the voice of the cuckoo.
Here the tree will not wear a cape of snow.
But it is here in the shade of these pines
my whole childhood reawakens.
…
With you I was transplanted twice,
with you, pine trees, I grew -
roots in two disparate landscapes." (Translation: Rachel Tzvia Back)

But, not all parts of the Israeli public show that much empathy towards these imported trees. A bitter debate over the question: "Pines, Yes or No?" has been going on for decades, between Israeli environmental groups and the JNF. An interesting example of this dispute can be found in the words of Israeli environmentalist author Zur Sheizaf, right after the "Second Lebanon War" in 2006. During this war, missiles shot by Hezbollah to northern Israel caused fires that burned down thousands of acres of JNF pine forests. Sheizaf wrote an article that was published in the popular website Ynet.co.il, in which he claimed that the burning down of these forests is "the biggest success of this war, the true mutual achievement for us (Israel) and the Hezbollah. They (Hezbollah) could definitely win an honorary mention from the state of Israel"(my translation). Sheizaf saw the burning down of the manmade pine forests as a chance to give way to a natural succession process. Native species might grow naturally over the burned land. Although Sheizaf's article was spiced with more than a hint of cynicism, it reflects the way many Israeli environmentalists see the pine as "the source of all evil" in the local landscape: foreign specie, easily spreading fire. Furthermore, the pines in the JNF forests are often planted in extreme density, blocking the light for any undergrowth, thus creating a boring, monochromatic landscape. This artificial landscape, according to Sheizaf, comes at the expense of the "true" landscape of this land – a Mediterranean bush dominated by native oak and pistachio trees.

The JNF was quick to respond. Israel Tauber, head of the forest management department in the JNF, published an article on the same website, in defense of the Pine forests. Tauber asks to make clear that before the planting of the pine forests, most of the land was "a desolate desert of ruined biotopes, crushed by thousands of years of fires, over – grazing, uncontrolled cutting down of trees done by the Inhabitants of this land and it's visitors the Byzantines, the crusaders, the Muslims, the Ottomans and others" (my translation).

Tauber's words express the myth of forests being planted over "barren land". But I would like to question that myth by asking: What is really hidden beneath the pine trees? Why is it hidden? Who are those "others" that Tauber refrains from naming?

To find the answers, let us go back to the war of 1948. Many of the Palestinians, who had fled from their homes during the Nakba, found shelter in the Palestinian Territories or neighboring Arab countries. In 1950, the Israeli Knesset enacted a law called "Absentee Property Law". This law enabled the Israeli state to nationalize their lands. As a result, one and a half million acres of land owned mainly by Palestinian refugees became property of the Israeli state. These lands included the ruins of Palestinian villages and the agricultural and grazing fields that belonged to their inhabitants. Three years later the JNF bought from the state almost half a million acres of land, most of which was taken from Palestinian owners according to the "Absentee Property Law". This land was not "barren land" but a land that had until recently been cultivated and inhabited by Palestinians & Bedouins.

The 1950s were a time of a massive immigration of Jews from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa to Israel. The JNF helped to fulfill "The Zionistic Dream", by building housing and infrastructure for these new immigrants, on some of the land it had bought from the state. On most of these lands, however, the JNF chose to plant pine forests. The planters were mostly new immigrants. The Zionistic ideal of absorption of Jewish immigrants in Israel was fulfilled through the act of forestry.

But at the same time this act did something else: it hid the remains of the Palestinian villages, which were demolished during the Nakba, under a thick covering of pines (Figure 2). Hiding the physical remains of the villages is also an attempt to conceal their memory. Six decades after the Nakba, it is important to reveal these ruins, since, as Edward Said stated: "there can

be no possible reconciliation….unless these two communities confront each's experiences in light of the other." [4]

The Olive Tree

Olive trees are known for their longevity. There are many examples of living olive trees that are said to be over 1500 years old. This is one of the reasons that both the Jewish and Arab cultures see it as a symbol of connection to the land.

For the Palestinians the olive tree is a symbol of the spirit of Tsumud (persistence), the stubborn clinging to the land, the determination to hold on in spite of the occupation. For Jews, the olive tree symbolizes the return to the "The Land of The Fathers".

The olive tree is also an international symbol of peace. However, in recent years, it paradoxically, became a symbol of the territorial conflict.

An Israeli law, known as the "Forest Ordinance"[5] defines the olive as a protected tree not to be cut down. When an area is declared "a closed military zone" and in times of war, this law, like many others, is often ignored. The poem "a State of Siege" by Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, is a lyric memoir from the siege on Ramallah in 2002. Darwish counts the victims of those violent days, amongst them, the olive trees:

"…
Our losses: from two martyrs to eight
every day,
and ten wounded
and twenty homes
and fifty olive trees,
in addition to the structural defect
that will afflict the poem and the play and the incomplete painting
…" (Translation: Fadi Joudah)

The chaotic situation has made olive trees subject to another form of violence. During the olive picking season, olive trees belonging to Palestinians in the West Bank are often vandalized. Dani Karavan protested against the government's turning a blind eye towards these violent actions in his work of the uprooted olive tree (Figure 3).

Ironically, though it represents connection to land, the Olive tree is very easy to transfer. The "Forest Ordinance" grants the Forest Official the authority to give special permission to uproot or transfer a protected tree. When a big development project is underway, the Forest Officials tend to permit the relocation of old olive trees. Over 60,000 olive trees have already been transferred to make room for the controversial project of "The Security Fence"[6], a physical border of walls and fences that is being built by the State of Israel beyond the Green Line. These ancient relocated trees are commonly found in newly made instant landscapes of roundabouts or novo-rich villa-gardens. The Israeli poet, Agi Mishol wrote of this phenomenon:

"Olive Tree

Shafted, stuck among three coconut palms
in a layer of gravel from the Home Depot
in the middle of a junction turned overnight
into a square.

Motorists hurrying home
see it perhaps
through clay pots tilting over,

[4] Said, "Invention, Memory and Place" - see literature list.

[5] The law was legislated during the British Mandate, and later adopted by The State of Israel.

[6] As published in: www.securityfence.mod.gov.il, an official website of the Israeli Defense Ministry.

but they have no time for the twisted story
that rises from its trunk or the flat top of the tree,
trimmed with a building contractor's sense of humor.

Nor can they fathom their roots groping
in foreign soil
clutching mother earth
like provisions from home
since the soldiers cut them down.

The olives, offered and unwanted, blacken
my face
and no miniature roses will divert my heart
from the shame." (Translation: Lisa Katz)

The challenge of Overlapping Landscapes

To end this paper, I would like to give my conclusion in view of the things written above. As landscape architects, it is important to realize that every aspect of our work is forever dependent on our own agenda and ideology. Nevertheless, if our agenda is one that wishes to see the end of this conflict, we must be aware of the multiple ways this landscape is read. We must acknowledge the fact that there isn't one landscape, but many overlapping ones. Our challenge is to be politically conscious when we design, since even a tree is not always as innocent as it seems.

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Figure 1:
Left- caricature image of the Sabra character known as: "Srulik" from 1951, created by the Israeli caricaturist Kariel Gardos.
Middle- Dani Karavan, "Abandoned Still Life" 1955, oil on canvas, 65X 51cm.
Right- Asim Abu Shakra, "Cactus" 1988, oil on paper, 120X80cm.

Figure 2:
A pine tree planted on a sabra in the JNF forest "Carmel Coast Forest" that was planted on the ruins of the villages Jaba, Ein Razale and A-Sawamir.

Figure 3:
Dani Karavan, Uprooted Olive Tree, from: a retrospective exhibition in Martin-Gropius- Bau, Berlin, 2008.