



## Hebron, or Heritage as Technology of Life

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Figure 1: “Hassan with the Bike” by Hassan Hourani (2001), representing the Old City of Hebron (Courtesy of the A.M. Qattan Foundation)

When I think of Hebron (in Arabic *Al-Khalil*, “the friend”), it brings to mind an image sketched by the late artist Hassan Hourani, born and raised in one of the tall stone houses so typical of the Old City. In this poetic representation of the city, the artist flies on a bicycle above it. There are two versions of the image. In the black-and-white drawing TV antennas as signs of the modern, visually dominate the Old City like tentacle-shaped arms attempting to reach the sky. In the color drawing, however, the antennas are absent. Here, the image is more surrealist in tone, with an emphasis on the characteristic elements of the traditional Arab Palestinian house. Here we see its arched openings, white domes and interlaced screen, as well as one of the key symbols of Palestinian nationalism: the olive tree. The cycling artist’s perspective overlooking the city is an impossible one, and from this impossible perspective the Old City appears as an organic whole, a harmonious unit. Weaving together art and heritage, Hourani’s images provide a commentary on the inextricability of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ in contemporary Hebron, as well as a powerful critique of the reality of an urban fabric disrupted by Israeli settlements, military bases, checkpoints and razor wire-fenced no-entry areas.

In contrast to Hourani’s poetic imaginary, the real Old City presents itself to the Palestinian inhabitants as a disarticulated urban space dotted with black holes, no-go and danger zones, a patchwork, an unstable geography. Hebron epitomizes in fact the progressive dismemberment of the Occupied Territories, triggered by Israeli settlements’ expansion in their midst that accelerated during the so-called peace process throughout the 1990s and in the

early 2000s. This fragmentation and its attendant politics of fear is evident in the most mundane but pressing ways: “Aren’t you scared of going through the *suq*?” my landlady asked me one day. Her surprise at my visits to the commercial, once bustling area that lies at the core of the Old City was only matched by my own surprise at hearing that she had not gone to the old *suq* in years, barely a five-minute walk from her home. This exchange highlights the shifting threats of the city for her as well as for many of my female friends and informants in Hebron: what was up until a decade ago the busiest part of town is today a dangerous and unfamiliar zone, in their words, a dead area.

This article focuses on the politics of space and heritage in this southern West Bank town, one of the symbols of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In what follows, I will analyze the current production of urban space in Hebron as the clash of two radically different spatial projects: a colonial project of dismemberment and a heritage project of restoration and revitalization (or *re-membering*) targeting the restoration of both the urban and social fabric of the city. For the sake of clarity, I will first discuss dismemberment and then restoration. Dismemberment of the Palestinian city and its appropriation is the goal of the Israeli colonization. I will show that the Israeli settlement project has produced a fragmented urban geography progressively segregated not only along ethno-national but also class and gender lines, attempting to commit what some scholars call “urbicide,” or the killing of the city, whereby “urbanity becomes the strategic object of violence.”<sup>1</sup> Working against this dismemberment is a local semi-governmental organization, the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee (HRC, locally known as *lajna* or committee) that has engaged in a major urban rehabilitation project since 1996. Their goal has been not only to conserve the endangered monuments but also to repopulate the progressively emptied and militarized city core. I will argue that the rehabilitation of old Hebron is not only a scientific project of heritage conservation but also an act of resistance and a project of local government.

The Old City is also paradigmatic of the extent to which, in the Israeli-Palestinian context, heritage represents an important site of politics, or rather, more precisely, what I call a spatio-political technology. This technology is situated at the juncture of the past and the present, science and politics, ‘conservation’ and resistance, the politics of space and the politics of memory, life and death. While elsewhere heritage and urban rehabilitation are often part and parcel of gentrification processes, in Palestine the politics of heritage acquires the semblance of anti-colonial resistance, of a technology of life.

## Setting the Stage

The Old City of Hebron is a complex palimpsest of past and present, an imbroglio of sandstone and concrete, urban and rural, the military and the bucolic. Far from immutable, I want to show how the past and the present are rather vitally

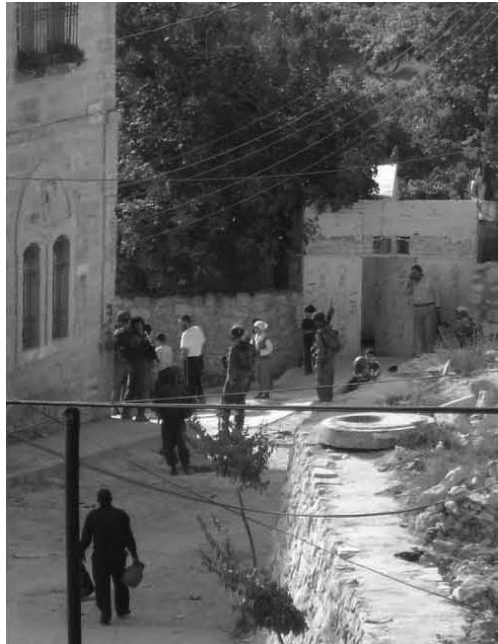


Figure 2: Barriers in the Old City (Photos by the author)

interdependent, permanently entangled.

Hebron is a very important religious site in both Islam and Judaism, due to the presence of the purported cave tombs of several biblical prophets in the centre of the city—today’s location of the Ibrahimi Mosque, also known as Tomb of the Patriarchs. The Old City grew around this important monument. In the immediate vicinity of the shrine are a series of Israeli colonies that claim to represent the descendants of the old small Jewish community of Hebron, forced to leave the city in 1936. As with other ‘shared’ shrines of the Holy Land, this sanctuary looks rather like an army base rather than a religious building, and its highly segregated and militarized space reproduces metonymically conditions that have spread throughout the city. Unlike other West Bank cities, in Hebron settlers have occupied a number of key spots right in the center of the Palestinian city. They are situated along a strip running between the Tomb of the Patriarch and another archaeological site, Tel Rumeida, which settlers identify as of biblical origins and therefore regard as the material proof of their legitimate presence in Hebron (see fig. 4). The immediate, physical proximity of settlers and natives generates extreme, epidemic violence, and thus propels the fencing of the city.

The dense historic fabric around the mosque is the subject of Hourani’s drawing. With large tracts dating to Hebron’s golden age in the medieval period, this part of town is made up of clusters of houses developed organically around narrow, irregular courtyards, and separated by small thoroughfares and winding vaulted alleys.<sup>2</sup> It is known as the old suq or *qasaba* and its recent history has been deeply shaped by the military. This is the soul and the most beautiful part of the city. Yet this beauty has today a profound uncanny, unhomey quality. This uncanniness resides in the emptiness and silence of the streets marked by the signs of military presence and urban conflict, in the displacement of most former residents that this has enforced. Grey concrete military towers stand next to historical buildings and rich nineteenth-century villas, fences, barricades and cement walls bar and redirect your movements, patrols of soldiers walk around a ruined urban landscape. What is also striking about the old suq is the way in which Palestinians have come to share with the Israeli soldiers a perception, a structure of feeling, that is characterized by a fundamental fear and repulsion toward a place—a place that has a stigma attached to it and its inhabitants.

It is in this area that the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee (HRC) has carried out most of its work, aiming to make this space livable once again. Apart from a few children playing in the street, the silence is interrupted only by the typical urban noise of ongoing construction—a noise that hints at the ways in which this memoryscape is constantly being worked at. In various locations throughout the Old City, HRC engineers and architects are at work with contractors and laborers to renovate abandoned and decaying old houses, refurbish non-existent or obsolete infrastructures, restructure public spaces into playgrounds and gardens, and provide streets with lighting. It is easy to tell the difference between rehabilitated and still abandoned areas, with the former offering a striking image both in their solid beauty and their tidiness, almost resembling Tuscan villages on a tourist brochure. One of these refurbished Ottoman-period palaces houses the main offices of HRC, which is



Figure 3: Before and after restoration (Courtesy of HRC)

immediately recognizable from the unusual traffic of people coming in and out of the building: employees, workers, residents looking for a certificate, development experts, solidarity groups in search of the latest news about settlement growth and human rights violations in the city, Palestinian Authority (PA) ministers and foreign consuls.

## **The Project of Dismemberment**

This landscape is an oxymoron, the outcome of a dialectical process of space production characterized by a highly asymmetrical power relationship, a collision of a project of dismemberment and a project of restoration and re-membering. The result is a temporal loop, an inversion of both spatialities and temporalities that are taken for granted. The two projects have to be understood as simultaneous and interrelated, but, for the sake of clarity, I will first discuss dismemberment, the tool and chief effect of Israeli colonial policies.

The Palestinian occupied territories have been the object of a large scale settlement project since their invasion by the State of Israel in 1967—in violation of international humanitarian law and against the grain of UN resolution 242. Settlement activity did not see an end with the Oslo Agreements, and in fact Israeli settlers's numbers have more than doubled since the early 1990s, reaching today five hundred thousand.<sup>3</sup> The growth of the settlements as well as the creation of a network of Israeli-only bypass roads has transformed the West Bank into a series of disconnected cantons often compared with the South African Bantustans—cantons which many doubt will ever turn into a viable, sovereign polity.<sup>4</sup> Several authors define current Israeli policies toward the Palestinians as apartheid.<sup>5</sup>

The crafting of space is at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to Eyal Weizman, space in the occupied territories is characterized by a fundamental flexibility and has to be conceptualized, rather than in terms of the static background of the conflict, as “constantly transformed, morphed, and claimed by action.”<sup>6</sup> What I call dismemberment involves an aberration (for critics the obvious consequence) of the core Oslo principle, in that separation has been transferred inside the Green Line, and dressed in hard concrete. Far from disappearing, settlements have grown larger and petrified, especially since the Second Intifada, as they are cordoned off and surrounded by high walls and fences. Rather than materializing along the internationally recognized Green Line, the border between Israel and Palestine has moved instead eastwards, exploding in the process into multiple segments.<sup>7</sup> The end result is two overlapping but hierarchically organized geographies. According to Alessandro Petti, an assemblage of chiefly architectural devices—settlements, bypass roads, checkpoints, and the Separation Wall— have produced two different spatial forms on the same hills of the West Bank: the archipelago and the enclave.<sup>8</sup> The first is the landscape of interconnected Israeli settlements, the space of flux, while the second one is represented by the patchwork aggregates constituted by Palestinian cities and villages, whose main feature is their increasing disconnection and fragmentation,

## Map of Hebron city center

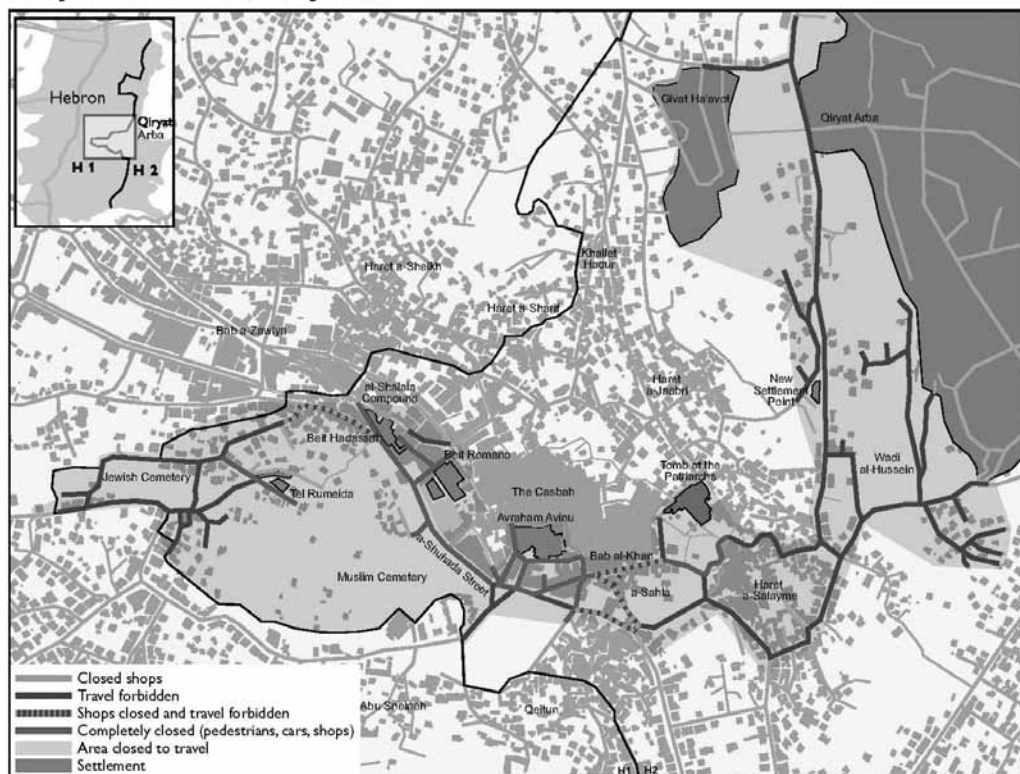


Figure 4: Map of the Old City and the settlements (Courtesy of B'Tselem)

The black line marks the border between Palestinian and IDF-controlled areas (H1 and H2). The light grey areas in and around the old *sug* indicate the settlements.

and the camp-like character. A key element of what Sari Hanafi calls a “spatio-cidal” strategy,<sup>9</sup> dismemberment in Hebron operates through segregation and is aimed at achieving just this kind of hierarchical space, whereby the constitution of the enclave signifies the end of urban life.

The ongoing occupation has dramatically transformed the Old City physically and socially. Due to its religious significance, Hebron was one of the outposts of the Israeli colonization, pushed forward by the religious-nationalist settler movement with direct and indirect government support.<sup>10</sup> A stronghold of Zionist fundamentalist organizations, Hebron’s colonies share a similarity with the Jerusalem ones. The presence of the Tomb of the Patriarch and the symbolism of the city accounts for this very peculiarity, that is, the fact that colonization here took place inside the Palestinian urban fabric, as opposed to colonization in the rest of the West Bank that takes place usually around the Arab towns. In this way, Hebron reproduces, as if in a nutshell, conditions that characterize the Occupied Palestinian Territories as a whole.

Instead of an Israeli redeployment, the Oslo Agreements brought intensified segregation to Hebron. Because of the presence of the colonies, the Hebron Protocol, signed in 1997, mandated the partition of Hebron into two districts: the New City

under Palestinian administration and the Old City under Israeli military control (so-called H1 and H2).<sup>11</sup> In the area of H2 the agreement set in place a dual legal regime, with settlers subject to Israeli civil law and Palestinians subject to both Israeli military law and PA civil law.

The imperative to protect settlers' security has propelled the militarization of the town, as well as segregation and the proliferation of borders, producing as its chief effects imprisonment and a condition of structural fear and humiliation for the native Palestinian population. With four thousand soldiers stationed to protect around six hundred settlers, a pattern of routine abuse and restriction of movement, meant that Palestinian life in the Old City has been disrupted and made close to unbearable, leading to the departure of most former residents and a dramatic deterioration of socio-economic conditions. While in the late 1960s there were seven thousand five hundred inhabitants in the Old City, their number had declined to a mere four hundred by 1996 right before the establishment of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee.<sup>12</sup> The middle class has left the Old City en-masse, despite successful attempts by HRC to restore the ruined historic buildings and bring Palestinian families back to live there. In multiple ways, partition as well as the hybrid technologies of the civilian occupation continue to fracture and segregate urban space, producing an urban geography paradoxically organized not only along ethno-national but also along class and gender lines. By militarizing the city and infecting it with the disorder of the border,<sup>13</sup> the project of dismemberment has turned a community's once vibrant urban centre into what Achille Mbembe and Hebron's inhabitants call a "death-world."<sup>14</sup>

According to a recent report by Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, a policy of "separation," which I prefer to call segregation, has guided the operations of the Israeli military (IDF) in the area.<sup>15</sup> The Israeli security forces believe that the physical separation of the two ethno-national communities is necessary on both security and operational grounds: in order to prevent frictions, guarantee the security interests of IDF personnel and Jews living in the Old City, as well as to ensure military operational efficiency. This constellation of needs requires the creation of "protective spaces" around the Jewish settlements by making streets, in IDF jargon, "sterile," which translates as empty of their habitual Palestinian users.<sup>16</sup> Buffer zones are operated through restrictions on Palestinian movement along with a pattern of routine violence perpetrated by both settlers and soldiers against Palestinians. Apart from multiple, protracted curfews, the past years have seen the closing off of an increasing number of streets to Palestinian vehicular and pedestrian traffic by the placement of numerous manned checkpoints and obstructions of different kinds.<sup>17</sup> There is a progressive "sterilization," then, of the segments of the Old City adjacent to the settlements. As of 2007, a continuous strip linking Hebron's colonies to the larger settlement of *Kiryat Arba* to the east of the city, has been almost completely cordoned off to Palestinians, effectively interrupting north-south traffic (see fig. 5).

The product of segregation is a ghost town, or, as local Palestinian residents frequently emphasize, a dead space they are forced to inhabit in fear. Economic life in the former core of Hebron has come to an end with the closure of 77 percent of



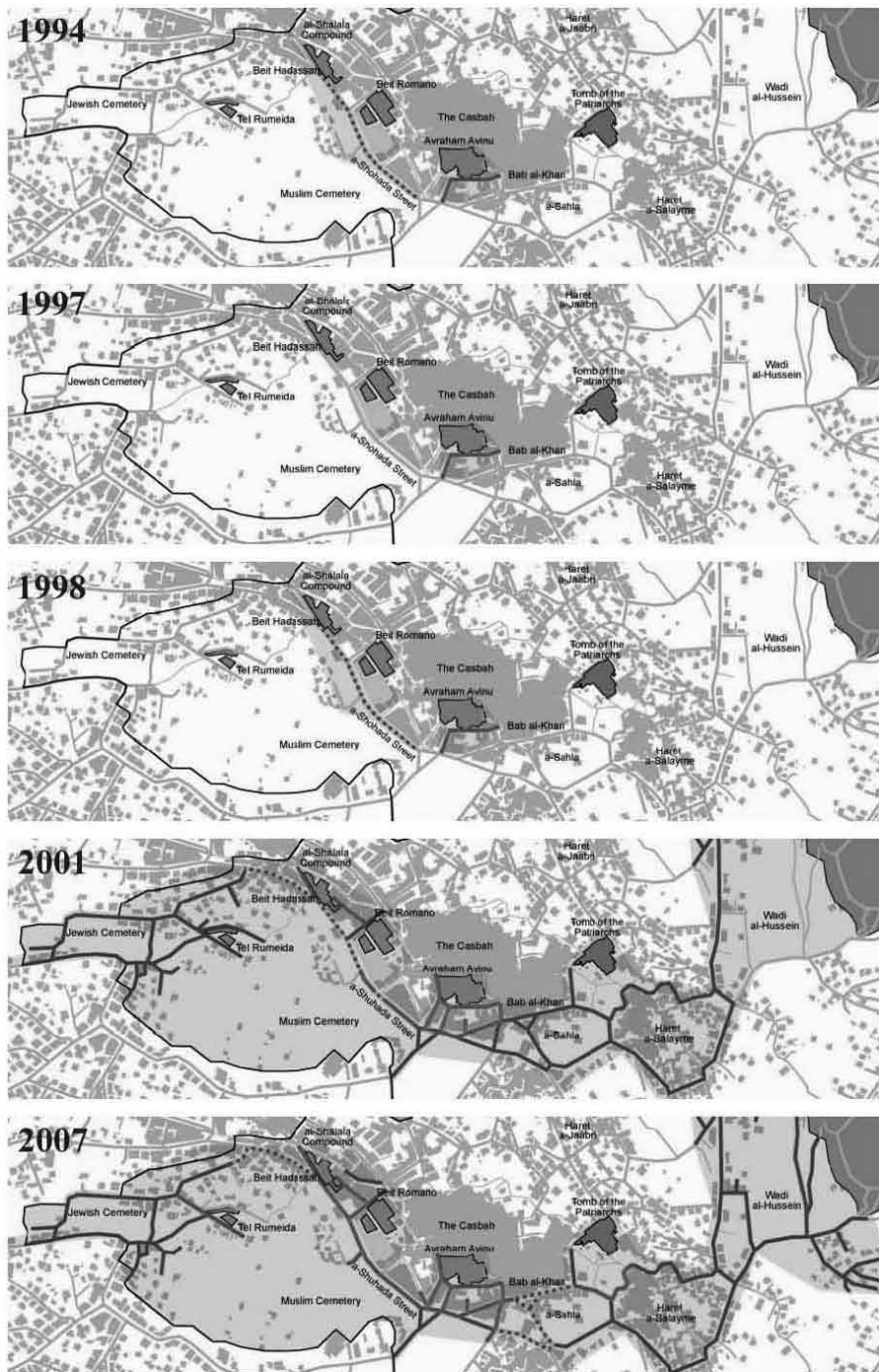


Figure 5: Restriction on Palestinian movement in the Old City 1994-2007 (Courtesy of B'Tselem). The Israeli settlements are in light grey, while in the darker grey-colored areas and in the highlighted streets Palestinian movement is highly restricted.

shops and commercial activities.<sup>18</sup> Once so full of people and activities that, as my informants recall, you needed more than a hour to get from the Ibrahimi Mosque to the end of the Old City, the suq is now so empty that you can cover the same distance in less than five minutes. Once very lively and crowded, the Old City, which had been for long the economic and religious center of Hebron, has turned into a number of empty alleyways. The word “sterile” used by the IDF for streets closed to Palestinian traffic resonates with Old City residents’ perception of the emptiness and death of their own environment. In this spectral space, fear is the feeling that most strongly defines the relationship between people, particularly women, and the city they inhabit. “Aren’t you scared of going to the suq?” My landlady’s remark highlights how even the once most familiar places of the Old City are now uncannily strange and frightening. This fear is not or not only fear of harassment on the part of settlers and soldiers but rather a fear of places, a fear attached to places, like the suq, that are imbued with these spectral and deadly qualities. This fear is a primary feature of the urban experience in the Old City of Hebron.

What is particularly striking, moreover, is the fact that this emergent urban geography is fractured along multiple lines. If the Oslo years have seen the proliferation of visible and invisible barriers, there are also ones dividing Palestinians from Palestinians. This is evident, for instance, in the way H1 and H2, the New and the Old City (*Khalil Foq* and *Khalil Taht*, or Upper and Lower Hebron), are increasingly two different towns, divided along class lines. With the mass departure of those who can afford much higher real estate prices elsewhere, dismemberment has transformed the Old City into the space of the poor and the disenfranchised, highly stigmatized in Palestinian middle-class imaginary as a space of danger, criminality, and ultimately backwardness. Most people who remain in the Old City and those who have recently moved into the housing units restored by HRC are typically impoverished families. Relationships between these two cities are being severed in a way that is so pervasive that HRC has spent much energy in recent years to organize workshops and activities around the issue of social cohesion. Traditional family visits no longer take place, and nearly all residents of the New City with whom I interacted said that they have not been in the Old City in years, even though most of them were born and still own an abandoned house there. A key practice of social integration, marriage, also occurs less and less between the two parts of town, because of the stigma of the Old City.

Another form of segregation affects the women of the Old City. Left unemployed in the context of the current economic crisis, surrounded by a militarized, dangerous environment, they are more and more confined to the space of the home and their immediate neighborhood, with the many pictures of former trips to other locations in Palestine/Israel or abroad there to witness the dramatic shrinking of their horizon. Without an income, and an Israeli permit to exit the enclave, leaving the house is almost an impossibility today. Many women only leave the house now to go shopping in the new suq or visit relatives in H1, most frequently accompanied by a male family member. A past of relative freedom of movement—evidenced by an impressive



Figure 6: Fenced windows protect from settlers's attacks

number of pictures of former trips to Jericho or the beach at Tel Aviv —is now recalled and longed for by many of the women I have worked with. Their sense of imprisonment hardens along with yearnings to just take a walk or get a breath of fresh air.

Hebron is imploding into multiple cities, inhabiting different spatialities and temporalities. Dismemberment occurs, then, also within Palestinian society itself. Such is, at least, the view of several of my Old City's informants, who lament the hardening of class barriers and the loss of nationalist cohesion that leave resistance and the frontline of struggle exclusively up to them. In discussing the history of the past decades, Hebronites often trace a clear distinction between the recent past and the present in terms of social cohesion. These are one of my informant's remarked:

Before, during the First Intifada, if there was a curfew, it was affecting everybody, both the Old and the New City were affected, we were together. We were like a family. *Now we have gone backwards. We were all together, Palestinian brothers. The entire city was one.* We did not suffer from hunger because we were helping each other; we did not have nor need policemen and did not have security problems. I used to leave the door of my house open. Now it is the opposite. There is polarization. There is dissension and sedition. (Conversation with author, November 2006)

These are the words of Mohammad, a former teacher who lives at the outskirts of the Old City. He contrasts the current situation with the period of the First Intifada, always celebrated in collective memory as a time of national unity and successful mass mobilization. He points his finger at the dissolution of the social fabric of the city and Palestine as a whole. What he also does, is delineate a process of change along three dimensions: the spatial, the social and the temporal. He not only draws a direct link between the spatial and the social disaggregation of the city. In his opinion, socio-spatial splintering also signifies a movement backwards in time, and an alteration of the familiar temporal flow.

The Old City is a circular space, both spatially and temporally. Well-known, yet fearful, its landscape functions as an oxymoron. The cityscape, charged with tensions,

homeostatic but unstable, is the product of a dialectical movement of opposing forces, which never ultimately arrive at synthesis. Presenting itself as a disarticulated, non-homogeneous space, it is also a space of dis-orientation, a constantly shifting, unstable landscape of closures and blockades, characterized by a never-ending temporariness. You get lost and have to find a new way every day, following shifting checkpoints, and you have to wait for hours at the mercy of a young soldier. My neighbor Imm Ahmed used to remind me with her gentle laugh that the Old City is *kullu laff wa dawran* (all about running in circles): in other words, the place of no straight paths, a set of detours rather than linear trajectories. The synthesis of dismemberment and restoration produces a temporal loop.

A very widespread discourse about Hebron, crossing everyday and sociological parlance, paints the city as the Palestinian antithesis of modernity. Not-really or not-yet modern and not-yet urban in sociologists' eye,<sup>19</sup> for many Palestinians this city represents the very locus of tradition and backwardness. Yet, this is the very modern product of the politics of space and heritage in the flexible territories. As Mohammad's statement quoted above ("we have gone backwards") suggests, there is a movement toward backwardness, it was not always already there. Following Imm Ahmed's thread, I want to suggest that the dialectics of dismemberment and restoration produces not only a tortuous spatiality but an inverted, recursive temporality as well.

One exemplary aspect of this re-making of 'tradition,' for instance, is the reinforcement of customary law as means to conflict resolution, a pattern further accelerated by the post-2000 collapse of the Palestinian Authority. The following quote comes from my interview with an Old City policeman:

According to the Hebron Protocol, Palestinian policemen stationed in the Old City have to be unarmed. I do not have equipment, like arms and cars. I have nothing to enforce the law. Because of this, I cannot use the modern way, I have to use the tribal way if I want to be effective in my operations. I cannot use the force of the modern state, and therefore I have to refer to customary law. My family is from the Old City, I am the head (*mukhtar*) of my family, and because of this I can be effective in what I do here. (Conversation with author, November 2006)

While the unarmed policeman is a sign of the non-sovereign state, the *mukhtar*-policeman indicates how tradition itself can be a tactic and a product of the modern state. In its multiple phenomenologies, whether this be a gendering of space or the injunction to produce heritage or a form of conflict resolution, the re-turn to 'tradition' is an effect of modernity, of the spatialized politics of the occupation and the new forms of resistance that the latter has engendered. Heritage and modernity co-exist and co-produce each other in this spectral place.

## The Project of Restoration

I cannot see the cultural heritage side without the political; I like old houses very much, and I want to protect them from decay and settlers. (Conversation with HRC architect, November 2006)

*Statement #1: HRC is a heritage project, targeting the rescue and conservation of the historic fabric of the Old City of Hebron, and working according to international scientific standards*

*Statement #2: HRC is a project of anti-colonial resistance, working through spatial means to block the expansion of the settlements in Hebron's midst*

*Statement #3: HRC is a public housing and a governmental project, administering the Old City on behalf of the Palestinian Authority whose operations are severely limited by full Israeli military control of H2*

Each of the three above statements holds true. The Hebron Rehabilitation Committee and the project of the rehabilitation of the Old City fulfill multiple functions: heritage conservation, anti-colonial resistance, and local government. This very ambiguity, this doing-multiple-things-at-once is at the core of HRC and, I would like to suggest, the entire heritage endeavor.

The winner of the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1998, HRC now provides a model for heritage conservation in the region. Their rehabilitation project is simultaneously a deeply political project. It is political both in the local sense of matters linked to the conflict as well as in the English more general sense of the term as activities related to government and power. Forms of struggle are shaped by the types and modalities of domination they oppose, in that they operate in a terrain which has largely, though not exclusively, been molded by that domination. Palestinians face what has been called an “everyday occupation,”<sup>20</sup> that is, a repressive power that has taken over the Foucauldian qualities of diffuseness and capillary motion, exploding the military into the everyday. At the same time, resistance has also imploded in a myriad domains, from ordinary daily life to culture.<sup>21</sup> In the Old City, this struggle against dismemberment, displacement and dispossession has creatively materialized in a project of historic conservation that counteracts both the spatial and ideological components of the Israeli settlement endeavor: it reclaims the city by remaking its space and restoring its identity and past.

According to the HRC mission statement, the organization was established “in light of the Palestinian Authority’s aspiration to preserve Hebron as a historical Arab Palestinian town, in order to safeguard its cultural and architectural heritage against the threat of a takeover by extremist Israeli settlers.” The project’s objective is twofold: “to preserve the city’s cultural heritage in an extensive sense, by

safeguarding the constitutive elements of its old buildings and ultimately save its entire architectural and social identity,” and “to revive the Old City, by consolidating its bond with its inhabitants, reclaiming abandoned buildings, rehabilitating the infrastructure, providing social services to the population and connecting it to other city neighborhoods.”<sup>22</sup>

HRC is one of several, mostly non-governmental Palestinian organizations dedicated to the preservation of the recent, vernacular past, particularly the historic urban landscape and the traditional Arab Palestinian house: what I have termed elsewhere the new Palestinian Heritage Movement.<sup>23</sup> These organizations target a past that differs considerably from that past which has achieved high visibility throughout the history of archaeology in Israel/Palestine and the Middle East, one dominated by pre-Islamic monumental sites and the Bible, and often functional to various colonial projects.<sup>24</sup> The new Heritage Movement also participates in the broader grassroots culture of remembrance focused on the node of Palestinian time, the catastrophe of 1948. While the *Nakba* marks the dismemberment of Palestinian society, its memory constitutes an act of national survival and a project of *re-membering*.<sup>25</sup> While, on the surface, heritage making in Palestine is primarily concerned with dead things—old stones, mortar, and arches—it has really more to do with living people and social spaces, with survival and resistance. As with other Palestinian heritage organizations, heritage conservation for HRC is immediately related to the revitalization of depressed neighborhoods, the architectural is tied to the social. The movement backwards to the past implies a movement forward to the future. Against urbicide, the overall goal is steadfastness, to stay put and to maintain the Palestinian quality of the city against erasure. Against decay and outright destruction, HRC rebuilds. To counter mass departures, HRC makes the city livable and social again. More mundanely, HRC partly run the administration of the Old City, from public housing to the issuing of residency certificates.

The story of the rehabilitation project follows closely the key political events of the past decades. This story began at the end of the 1970s, roughly at the same time as colonization in the Old City, with attempts by a newly elected and very popular municipal council to repair the decaying old buildings and to provide primary services such as water and electricity to their inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> These efforts stopped shortly afterwards with the dismissal and exile of the council and the replacement of the elected functionaries with an Israeli-appointed body. In 1980, the Israeli government authorized Jewish residential settlement in the heart of the city, which had already begun ‘illegally’ in 1979.<sup>27</sup> In 1984 the settlers published a master plan for Hebron that called for regaining the allegedly Jewish properties abandoned in 1929-36, in order to judaize the Old City by the gradual displacement of its inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> It was then, at the end of the 1980s, that a group of young scholars and architects from the Hebron Polytechnic carried out architectural and social surveys in the old town and started considering plans for rehabilitation.<sup>29</sup> With the momentum of mass mobilization triggered by the First Intifada, there emerged a grassroots, impassioned commitment

to the rescue of the Old City. This was particularly critical as the city was being abandoned by the majority of its inhabitants, making vacant buildings vulnerable prey to the expansionism of the settlers.

The creation of an effective organizational structure to promote the rehabilitation of the militarized, impoverished, and depopulated Old City was not fully realized, however, until the direct intervention of Yasser Arafat in 1996 and the establishment of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, consisting of a board made up of local political figures and an engineering office with the team that had started the works at the end of the 1980s. Arafat is said to have taken a very personal interest in the cause of the Old City of Hebron, and there are urban legends recalling his alleged undercover visits to the city and his strong support for the rehabilitation project. This strategy on the part of the head of the PLO reflected the internal politics of the Oslo Accords: the harvesting and cooptation of grassroots efforts by Arafat and the top Fatah cadre in the framework of the larger goal of backing and furthering the Oslo process.<sup>30</sup> At that time, the status of Hebron was the object of ongoing negotiations. Excluded at the last minute from the 1995 Oslo II Agreement, Hebron's case was isolated because of the Israeli unwillingness to redeploy due to the settlers' presence. Arafat's main goal, then, was to create some facts on the ground before signing the accord, namely, to increase the Palestinian population of the Israeli-controlled areas. Together with Bethlehem 2000, the rehabilitation of Hebron's Old town is the only heritage project to have received full, high-level political backing in the form of both institutional and financial support from the Palestinian Authority. While Bethlehem was conceived as the renewed fulcrum of global tourism, the site of Palestinian rebirth and the PA flagship project, Hebron represented one of the Authority's core battlefields.

In its first years, HRC concentrated on what it calls the first "circle." Using a battlefield language, HRC is referring here to areas immediately adjacent to the settlements. In these areas, the aim was the restoration of dilapidated buildings, the provision of a new infrastructural network including lighting, and the delivery of basic services. More recently, the organization has adopted a more comprehensive developmental approach. Additionally, as part of an effort to break the walls isolating the Old City and reconnect it to the New City, they have started working in the so-called "second circle" neighborhoods, that are more distant from the settlements and provide a bridge between the two parts of the town.

While respecting the international standards in historic conservation, HRC does nevertheless make some changes to the structure of the old houses in order to accommodate the needs of the new residents. Such changes include the subdivision of the large complexes into individual apartments with separate, private entrances, as well as the provision of a kitchen and bathroom to each apartment. These spatial modifications reflect the changing social arrangements in the Old City, primarily a shift from extended to nuclear families.<sup>31</sup> Impoverished nuclear families without strong social ties to their neighbors have replaced extended families who lived in relatively homogeneous quarters—extended families that have now partly reconstituted their kinship-based neighborhoods in the New City. Left behind in the Old City are only a

few of their former members, typically the old and the poor. In these several respects, then, the Old City is more 'modern' than the new.

To combat mass departure, residents of the Old City have been given access not only to extremely favorable rent conditions but also to multiple free services (such as electricity, water and health insurance) as well as various tax reductions. These subsidies are meant as incentives to stimulate the repopulation of the area and as rewards for the service to the nation performed by Palestinians for the very fact of living on a battlefield. In order to further help contain the effects of worsening socio-economic conditions and rising unemployment, since the Second Intifada Old City's families have been additionally entitled to monthly food distributions by the International Committee of the Red Cross. While there are no recent population surveys to confirm the actual current number of residents, HRC has succeeded in bringing a total of three to four thousand people back to live in the Old City.<sup>32</sup> According to the last survey conducted in the Old City in 1999, between 60 and 75 percent of the residents fall below the poverty line, and only two households reported an income higher than US\$1000 per month.<sup>33</sup>

The 1999 survey reports that over half the residents (58 percent) are owners of their residential units, while 42 percent are renters from absentee landlords. In the context of post-2000 developments, however, the percentage of tenants has since increased to almost 60 percent of the Old City population.<sup>34</sup> This data highlights the continuous exodus of native Hebronites, balanced by an influx of impoverished newcomers. The survey further notes that the majority of tenants in 1999 were Hebron residents who either originated in the community or who had immediate relatives coming from there. It also reports a substantial number of returnees, that are, former militants and PLO personnel who have returned to Palestine with the PA, and now work within its cadres: for these militants turned policemen, inhabiting the Old City is often a national duty. While no new census has been carried out, a trend of increasing sociological note is the arrival of families from the villages around Hebron, whose main breadwinner has lost his job in Israel in the wake of the recent closures. In other words, recent immigrants are people who are unrelated to both politics and the Old City.

While the Old City is often described in terms of a homogeneous community of the poor, there are in fact deep divisions within it. A relevant social distinction that recurs in daily chats is the one between original residents and newcomers, especially with the poorest among them now concentrated in the areas immediately adjacent to the settlements in the suq. These social categories are most frequently reiterated by original residents who sometimes refer to newcomers as strangers, as bearers of a different, peasant culture, and as lacking a shared memory and therefore a strong "commitment to the Old City." Sometimes, stigmatization turns into active discrimination and even acts of violence against newcomers. This distinction is a move that paradoxically reproduces internally the stereotyping and stigmatizing attitude of Upper Hebronites and middle-class Palestinians toward Old City's residents as a whole. Serving to demarcate class differences within the Old City. Such practices of distinction point at the frictions and fractures within Hebron's very own social





fabric, at the workings of dismemberment from within.

A deconstruction coming out of the reconstruction, the problem of social cohesion preoccupies HRC architects and social workers. Another issue of relevance for them is awareness-raising, or the attempt to make people feel that they live in a place and a past that matters, to the Palestinian nation and beyond, and to develop a commitment to the Old City among the residents. For some time now, to counter fragmentation and social erosion, the committee has embarked on a new series of development-oriented activities. While in its first years the organization concentrated on restoration, repopulation and delivery of primary services, more recently it has shifted its focus to broader spatial and social concerns, with different schemes aimed at restoring the social life in the Old City as well as restoring the latter's ties to the rest of Hebron. Toward this end, a legal department, a social center as well as a research unit have been created, along with a diversified program of social development. This program includes multiple vocational training courses for women and the unemployed, entertainment for the children, outreach activities including lectures and seminars about both heritage and integration, and a series of educational school trips to the old town designed to teach outsiders about its value. Most importantly, HRC has begun to prepare a conservation master plan for the Old City, and to devise mechanisms to ensure its social and economic revitalization and its integration with the rest of the city.<sup>35</sup> In this way, they aim to preserve the historic neighborhoods while



Figure 7-8: New life in the Old City (Photos by the author)

planning for a future tourist development. The HRC master plan points at a paradox which is a feature of Palestinian heritage in general: organizations such as HRC are both governmental and non-governmental at the same time, or rather governmental because of being non-governmental. The preparation of a master plan is a function of local government, which, in Hebron's case, is carried out, with international funding, by what is officially a semi-governmental organization dedicated to heritage preservation. HRC has in fact assumed a series of governmental functions in the Old City, functions related to the operations of legibility (survey, mapping, statistics) and control of the state (planning, surveillance, granting of residency certificates), as well as welfare (public housing, distribution of health insurance certificates, counseling). And yet HRC has been able to continue to perform these functions thanks to its resemblance to a heritage NGO. Since its early years, HRC's infrastructure of funding support has changed considerably toward a much greater diversification. Although at the beginning the committee was mainly funded by the PA and Arab donations, thanks to its reputation as an effective and scientific project a variety of European donors have increasingly contributed to the organization's budget starting in the late 1990s. While NGOization and independence from the PA is usually prompted by the search for better funding opportunities,<sup>36</sup> it often allows not only for more flexibility but for continuity of operation as well. This became apparent in the case of the protracted public sector strike that paralyzed the PA in 2006, during which HRC was able to still carry on some of its projects thanks to its now semi-governmental arrangement. The situation during the strike highlights well the ambiguous position of HRC in terms of its relation to the 'government.' One of the paradoxes of Palestine, as shown by the Hebron case, is that to 'govern' better, institutions have to be non-governmental, at least on the surface.

Heritage is a modern technology for the production of 'tradition' and roots; it also facilitates the government of territories and identities. In Hebron, this technology works to "breathe life back into the Old City,"<sup>37</sup> in other words, it is a technology of life. Here, heritagization works to rejoin the fragments of Palestinian life in the city, giving it both temporal depth and geographical continuity and reconstituting a whole out of an urban space disarticulated by the wounds history has inflicted upon it. It is restoration in both its technical and metaphorical sense: about restoring both the urban and social fabric, about reweaving the web of relations that used to tie the old town to its surroundings. Very concretely, the heritage technology works to stop the expansion of the settlements, while simultaneously pursuing heritage conservation according to the professional standards of this scientific discipline. Heritage practitioners often claim for what they do the purified status of neutral scientific practices, devoted to the past as past—even as they are deeply involved in modern politics. HRC's work lays bare the very muddiness, the polifunctionality of heritage.

## Epilogue: Citizens vs. Subjects

I do not care only about buildings and infrastructures. *I also have to care about the humanitarian aspects, about the human beings!* This means providing entertainment, creating cultural centers, and social centers to study the problems of the Old City. (Conversation with HRC architect, May 2006)

In this article, I have argued that the HRC project is characterized by doing multiple things at once, pointing to the flexibility of the heritage technology. I believe this is the case with heritage beyond Palestine as well, but what is peculiar of this use of the heritage technology is the link with life and justice. Juggling many things at once, the architects of HRC are restoring an important part of the nation's heritage, while working to stop the expansion of the settlements by repopulating the old ghost town and keeping its Palestinian identity. They are also managing and developing the Old City. In this way, Hebronites practice their fundamental "right to the city," in Henri Lefebvre's sense of a "transformed and renewed right to urban life."<sup>38</sup> Or as David Harvey describes such a claim to the city: "[this is] far more than a right of access to what already exists: it is a right to change it ... and to remake ourselves in another image by constructing a qualitatively different kind of city."<sup>39</sup>

Their technology of life is a response to a strategy of urbicide, and the daily operation of dismemberment—a technology of destruction—whose symbol is the bulldozer obliterating large tracts of the Palestinian urban fabric as well as multiple layers of its history. This technology is spatio-political for it attempts to restructure social relations through their spatial form. "Rehabilitating houses is rehabilitating social life," one of HRC engineers once told me. Heritage, as a technology through which relations between people and between people and things are transformed, in Hebron it represents an attempt to reconnect residents with their own history, as well as a way to retrace an organic relationship with the newer parts of the city, a way to a more livable environment. This is a past that gives people roots and a sense of stability and continuity. In response to inquiries about their feelings for their newly renovated homes and the work of HRC, my informant Samira would repeat, along with many others: "These walls are strong and valuable" and "I will never leave this house." This sense of strength and value is what the organization has managed to inspire, at least in some of the current Old City residents.

Yet, this sense for the value of the past—this "commitment to the Old City" as my informant Nuha used to frame it—is not uniformly distributed among its inhabitants. According to HRC employees, one of the chief obstacles in carrying out their work, in addition to the lack of social cohesion, is the "lack of awareness" of most residents, both natives and newcomers. The employees frequently lament this state of affairs in the old town with similar remarks:

We are trying very hard. We keep high standards. We give them [Old City's residents] beautiful apartments ... And what do we have from them? *They keep complaining, they are never satisfied and do not take care of their houses.* ... We have a problem with awareness. They do not appreciate and we work so hard. I want to feel that I am doing something. (Interview with HRC employee, November 2006)

*They do not care about the public [good].* (Conversation with HRC engineer, October 2006)

A certain friction between HRC and its constituency is further emphasized by popular criticism leveled by residents at the organization, including rumors of corruption as well as accusations of favoritism and lack of transparency. While overall, the work of the committee is appreciated, it is not uncommon in the Old City to hear such comments:

I ask Rawwan about her opinion of the work of the committee. She says she is not happy. They do not respond to her requests [usually for repairs]. For example, her windows have been smashed by the settlers, but the committee does not do anything. She says they work with recommendations. Samira intervenes saying that many complain about the committee. (My notes from a discussion in an old town home, November 2006).

Other people lament that HRC is concentrating on heritage instead of focusing on the economic rehabilitation of the Old City and service provision. I take these frictions as evidence of a fundamental misunderstanding about the role of HRC and the rights and duties of its constituency. This has arisen as a side-effect of the peculiar subjectification process underway in the space of the old town, that is, a process centered on the distinction between citizens and political agents on the one hand, and subjects (of humanitarian aid) on the other.

HRC committed engineers lament the Old City residents' love for the new and their lack of concern for the past. This is increasingly frustrating: as with other heritage NGOs in Palestine, multiple outreach activities focus on the notion that heritage preservation is one of the duties of the citizens of the state-to-come—a duty made even more relevant by the key location of heritage at the heart of the conflict. This discourse turns heritage care into a signifier of modern democratic citizenship, as a component of the duty to take care of a public good that includes the national past as much as the right to benefit from it. Yet, this discourse at times works to cover its own impossibility.

While interpellated as active political agents, as militants and citizens of the state-to-come, called upon to actively participate in the preservation and revitalization of the national past, the Old City's residents are simultaneously constituted as “beneficiaries” and lumpen proletarians within the dialectics of socio-spatial production I have described above. Under the conditions created by the indefinite protraction of the

occupation, the Old City's residents are constituted as subjects dependent upon humanitarian aid, and thus deprived of political agency.<sup>40</sup> In the context of tightening closures and skyrocketing unemployment, they are increasingly dependent on the services provided by the committee and various charitable organizations, ranging from food provisions to repairs to their houses. At the same time, their most basic rights, chief among others the right of free movement, are severely limited. They are increasingly reduced to bare, naked life.<sup>41</sup>

Engineer Ahmad's concern with "car[ing] for the humanitarian aspects," quoted at the beginning of this section, provides a clue that can help to unravel the contemporary relationship of dependency between HRC and its constituency. Designed to operate for a short period of time before independence,<sup>42</sup> and initially counting on a pool of committed families—a committee in the political sense of the mass mobilization of the late 1980s—HRC has since moved in the years of the Second Intifada from a political to a developmental project, or rather, more and more, to an emergency humanitarian one. As for the old town's residents, they are neither politically mobilized, nor actively participating in the rehabilitation project or in decisions about the future form of the city they inhabit. For them, relocation has often meant indeed a "move backwards," and it is not so surprising, then, that they do not appreciate 'their own' past.

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## Endnotes

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  - 33 Salim Tamari, *Hebron's Old Town*, p. 3. Not unexpectedly, another salient feature of life in the Old City is the low degree of people's outer mobility, with 42 percent of residents stating that they rarely see their relatives which live outside and reporting a strong sense of confinement and isolation.
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  - 41 Diane Enns but also Sari Hanafi, Achille Mbembe and Alessandro Petti have borrowed Giorgio Agamben's terminology to explain the subjectivities inhabiting the isolated Palestinian Bantustans as akin to the *Muselman*, the inhabitant of the camp reduced to bare, naked life—an occupied body stripped of rights, living a life that has the quality of death, see Diane Enns, "Bare Life and the Occupied Body," *Theory & Event* 7, no. 3 (2004). [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v007/7.3enns.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v007/7.3enns.html). Mbembe and Petti both emphasize the spatial framing of this subjectification process.
  - 42 HRC had planned its own role and operation to be a temporary phase before independence. As with other institutions created under the Oslo framework, however, their temporariness became long-lasting. This is a HRC employee's explanation of the peculiar time frame of the organization: "All that we do, like the contracts, are counted in five-year periods because at the beginning we thought that we were going to work this way only for a temporary period, namely five years, until the establishment of the state; the state, however, never came and we still work within this temporal frame" (Interview, November 2006). This permanent temporariness is a key strategy of the occupation and a feature of the normalization of a state of emergency. It is in the context of this ever-present temporariness that the discourse of heritage, as one of continuity and rootedness as well as wholeness, becomes more salient and effective.