Yeruham Development Town and the neighbouring Rach’mé Bedouin Unrecognised Village

Irit Katz Feigis, 27 July - 25 August 2012

Conflict in Cities affiliated PhD student Irit Katz Feigis recently conducted a fieldtrip to Israel for her dissertation titled “The Common Camp: Temporary Settlements as a Spatio-Political Instrument in Israel”. The rapid political and demographic changes in Israel’s early years generated the creation of temporary settlements, a form of civic camps. Some camps were created ‘top-down’ by the government to deal with the waves of Jewish immigrants and enable the strategic distribution of the Jewish population. Simultaneously, other camps, constructed by displaced local Palestinian and Bedouin populations, were ‘bottom-up’ spatial productions—accumulation of makeshift structures formed by agreements and needs. As the geo-political map changed, additional formal and informal types of camp appeared, such as Jewish settlements and outposts in the occupied territories, and a transit camp for African refugees adjacent to the Israeli-Egyptian border.

The purpose of the fieldtrip was to collect historic documents related to camps which were created in Israel/Palestine during the British Mandate and the state’s early years. During the trip, archival research was conducted in The Zionist Archive, The Israeli State Archive and in the Israeli Defence Force Archive with the aim to find documents concerning the creation, management and sometimes destruction of these camps in order to understand their role in the creation and development of permanent settlements in Israel.

The notion of the ‘camp’ relates to a piece of land which is included within the state’s territories yet placed outside the normal juridical order. While the locality of hegemonic civic environments is defined by territorial distinction, historic continuity and state legislation, the camp is a spatial paradigm of the exception, where temporariness and facts replace the law. The idea of the camp enables one to look
at a diverse set of temporary spaces in Israel, created by and for ethnic minorities or groups with a specific ideology, as the expression of the same phenomenon in which architecture and politics become inseparable.

These temporary built environments were and still are being used by the state of Israel as a flexible means of controlling and administering land and population to pursue the government’s territorial interests, while on the other hand camp residents are actively using their status as a platform for their ongoing spatio-political struggle. During this fieldtrip relevant documents have been analysed in the archives such as protocols of government meetings and other files containing correspondence between government officers and other state authorities concerning the creation, management and demolition of the Jewish absorption camps since the establishment of the state until the late 1950’s.

Israel is an important example of the nationalist creation and territorial re-definition of states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, using different techniques of temporariness in order to manage populations in space. While some of these environments have been previously discussed as site-specific phenomena, there is still no research analysing them under the single prism of their temporariness. The examination of photographs, plans and other illustrations related to the shape and function of these camps as well as to their spread in the Israeli territory will help to examine them through their architecture, as well as the extent to which they have been planned and the nature of their planning, in order to better understand the different ways temporary spaces were used to achieve political objectives both by the state and by its subjects.

Within the Israeli territory, one can identify concrete examples of the formal and informal camp types within a relatively confined geographical area. Following preliminary field work, two neighbouring camps were chosen on which the dissertation will focus; the southern city of Yeruham which was created in the 1950s by the government as a Ma’abara – a Jewish immigrant absorption camp – which later became a development town (photograph 1), and the neighbouring Rachme, an ‘unrecognised village’ which was created in the 1960s as an informal Bedouin settlement (photograph 2). While Yeruham enables the examination of the architectural characteristics of a formal camp type and its development into a permanent environment, Rachme allows the analysis of the informal camp, its connections to a former nomadic culture, and its future possible transformation to a permanent settlement.

The trip was also devoted to initial site observations and preliminary meetings and in-depth interviews with residents, planning officials and NGO activists related to Yeruham and Rahme. The first aim was to ascertain that field research is indeed feasible – this required the approval of key-individuals from the very close-knit Bedouin community such as Rachme’s Sheikh. The consent of elder residents of Yeruham to speak about their past as camp inhabitants was also obtained. The second aim was to understand the different spatial characteristics and patterns of the camp that could be studied and compared in these two adjacent but very different settlements.

An examination of the relations created between these camps – both spatially and socially - will enable an understanding of them not only as a result of complicated political circumstances but also as concrete places. This may bring to light the possibility of an additional spatio-political meaning – the possibility that their past and current existence as camps—outside the normal order—forces their respective residents cooperate at the local level in order to resist their ongoing temporary status.