

## **Saving Lifta**

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Lifta, a Palestinian village, inside Israeli territory, sits within a valley adjacent and below the Jaffa Road on the north-west perimeter of Jerusalem. The village suffered the same fate as many Palestinian villages that were ethnically-cleansed in 1947/48 during the Palestinian catastrophe - Al Nakba. Remarkably, a large proportion of the architectural antiquities that characterize the village still remain standing today. Lifta has survived total erasure because her surrounding landscape, set within a valley, is virtually cut-off and sunk beneath the surrounding civilization. She has stood obscurely now for over 60 years and no conquest has of yet physically re-contextualized the place. Her unique circumstance, created out of these consequences, has led her to become a space of captivation, necessity and privilege.

And now the valley has been given an incarnation under the approved plan to transform the village into a commercial edifice allocated under the guise of 'Mei Naftoah'; also known as 'Plan 6036'. The redevelopment plan has been approved on and above Lifta and will disregard any association of the memory of Lifta. It will appropriate her cultural heritage through architecture and planning that will re-invent the identity of the valley landscape. The Mei Naftoah approved plan will consist of a commercial centre with shops, hotels, bus stations and to develop 212 luxury apartments.

In January 2011, the Israeli Land Administration (ILA) announced a tender for Plan 6036 allowing private contractors to begin to bid; triggering the process to sell-off Lifta's plots of lands. This announcement provoked immediate reaction amongst former Palestinian descendants of Lifta (many of whom now reside in East Jerusalem), Israeli and Palestinian conservationists and NGOs. This reaction led to a petition and resulted with a temporary court injunction issued on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 2011, ordering the ILA to freeze the tender. And now a struggle commences forming solidarity amongst regional professionals and organisations. Opponents to Plan 6036 have appealed for Lifta's recognition with UNESCO, the Worlds Monument Fund and other Agencies. Along with media campaigns and protests held more or less every fortnight by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation descendants of the village.

This is all promising in the short-term; however there is a need for a long-term strategy that will clearly define the significance and necessity of this place. I have been involved on a research project-campaign concerning saving Lifta since 2006. And from this research I shall highlight a long-term strategy. To begin with, what does it mean to save this place and what significance does she bare for the region?

By saving Lifta, I imply we are trying to protect a place that still exists in the form of a bond. 'Memory' in respect to Lifta is the essence of the place, she is bare without people telling their stories and affirming their union to the place. Recognition of this bond existing also means to recognize cultivation, a history and a tangible reality.

A place with a history prior to 1948 and sited within a territory of the governing power of Israel, Lifta sits inside a surrounding context identifiable by another historical narrative. For the two identities to sustain a shared value - an identifiable relationship, there has to be a reason and value. Situating the Nakba into a revised historical narrative of the surrounding

context is likely to create controversy and can easily be perceived as an historical problem. So how does it become possible to resolve this crisis of values?

For Israel, Lifta is a place needing enquiry for the purposes of practising self-reflection and self-reappraisal. Lifta allows the Nation-State to have a space to contest, understand, and respond to the origins of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Taking aside the significance of memory relating to a catastrophe and an historical origin perpetuating 'otherness', the memory of Lifta also embarks upon a history of a different societal pattern and practice of space. Before the events of 1948 the village had a tribal community with a population consisting of around 3000 people. Lifta was a place that embraced a strong sense of an ethnically and religiously diverse community of Muslims, Jews and Christians. There was no inequality amongst this diversity, so there was never any conceivable idea of segregation.

Lifta's traceable history prior the Palestinian Nakba and the creation of the modern State can begin to allow us to look beyond the symbol of the 'other'. She sustained ethical values which can be deemed as necessary within the current regional context of society. Recognition of this truth and quality can influence the possibility of allowing this heritage, traditionally perceived as belonging to the 'other' existential narrative, to become admissible in the region. Lifta still is a traceable genealogy that gives insight into the origins of the conflict, and these issues are fundamental to the process of understanding, tangibly engaging and reconciling conflict. Emphasis of civil equality also enhances the opportunity of contesting other issues represented by this place to become more tolerable.

Upon reflection, the uprooting of the village was a tragedy for the Palestinian community of the village however, the community encompassed multi-ethnic groups. The Nakba in Lifta was a catastrophe for the Palestinian Muslims, Christians and Jews. There is historical evidence that gives reason to believe that this event encompassed a discord for all ethnic groups associated to it. They provide a significant opportunity for suggesting alternative outlooks and views that can influence the working of a new narrative, a new history, and a new space. Exploration of memory can become paramount in creating and enabling mechanisms to defuse the attitudes that translate into a language of adversity and dissonance of the differing existential beliefs.

Taking on the question of justice concerning Lifta requires vision for long-term interventions. We can discuss the safeguarding and preservation of Lifta, or the United Nations Resolution 194 and its poignant regard to the Palestinian 'right of return', and yet there seems to be no significant answers of how to connect the past with the present. I believe an attempt should be made to construct a proposal for Lifta to be realized as a 'Site of Conscience'. The International Coalition for Sites of Conscience 'interpret history through historic sites; engage in programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues; promote humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function; and share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site.'

My organisation - Belonging (an architecture, planning and human rights organisation) will carry out this investigation. We acknowledge that actively challenging discursive discussions on the environment is a necessary stepping-stone for creating the imaginings of utilities that stride towards supporting the changes needed for peace. The purpose will be to demonstrate why the heritage of Lifta is potentially invaluable and necessary for future peace in the region and the potential of Lifta's space as a place for conciliatory dialogue.

Through a process of dissecting and illuminating the chasms of Lifta's historical landscape, we will engage into and assert why this place has the potential to harbour such a proposal. A potential gateway to a space seeking a goal to confront and reconcile narratives of histories, otherness and conflict whilst, demonstrating possibilities of a place that promotes healing, pluralism and inclusiveness.

Engaging into the memory of the Nakba, in this instance from a place that has remained virtually desolate and un-appropriated since her uprooting in 1948, provides the backdrop for a real space within the Israel/Palestine region that has the capacity to make accessible an open dialogue and encounter a sense of shared-values through the issues of 'displacement', 'victimhood' and 'tragedy'. Themes that not only resonates throughout the Palestinian narrative since 1948, but are historically preserved and ever-present within the narrative of the Israeli 'other'; for instance the Holocaust, and the displacement of Arab Jews in the North African and Middle East region. Sharing and building upon multiple common themes and reaching beyond rivalry.

A place that can challenge and defuse narratives that translate into a language of opposition or even hostility by presenting and addressing common themes shared in the tragic histories by both peoples. The narratives of displacement shared together at Lifta can create this place into a necessary common-ground for the purposes of healing and conciliation as well as drawing upon the potential of this place for the purposes of invaluable capacity-building for the regional civil society.

Conducting further research into Lifta's memory and juxtaposing truths can possibly allow further contestable narratives and introduce new possibilities for the reconstruction of heritage. A heritage that can allow an acceptance of truths that can bring together both sides of the conflict to share the same grief and hope and re-evaluate relationships for the sake of the regional community.

Saving Lifta is only likely to be achievable if she asserts values that are inclusive in her objective of becoming recognized as a place. And a desire towards a monument that can convey new meaning and understanding as well as offer alternative capacity building can prove invaluable. In prospect an attainable value through the reconstruction of heritage aiming to bridge worlds together by creating mechanisms out of bond between memory and place.