

# Design for disarming times

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In this text, the perspective of conservatism is drawn to something of 'inherent' value, and explores notions of cultural heritage, indigenous knowledges and the current political conditions they exist within. All through the perspective of design. This interest arose from my experience of setting up create shops in Palestine for the design platform 'Disarming Design from Palestine'. During our yearly workshops, local and international designers worked with Palestinian craft practices and developed useful objects that underscored connections between tradition, innovation and the political narratives they exist within. By deeply engaging with the field of crafts and design in Palestine, I witnessed what colonial occupation is, and what it can do to people, identity and land. Urging us to question the role of design in the processes of emancipation and expression of marginalized identities.

How can design help counteract unjust realities and contribute to social transformation? Listening to the stories of artisans and designers profoundly changed me as a global (and local) citizen and as an engaged practitioner. It taught me about life through the medium of craft, materiality, resources, land, collaboration, solidarity, as well as the political implications they each can have. This is a story about what can be learned from designers and artisans in Palestine. How can we use processes of design as a tool to learn from our worlds?

## Craftsmanship & Materiality

Last summer, with the create shop, we visited a wood workshop near Ramallah in the occupied West bank, where the carpenter proudly showed us examples of the complicated and admirable woodwork he used to make for his clients. He explained that customers hardly ask for this skilled work of his anymore as they either find it too expensive or fail to understand the urgency of it – neither do they see the quality. And so, the demand for this competent labour is reducing, with orders becoming less specific, questions more generic, making it harder (and less joyful) for artisans to compete with machines and mass production. The artisan explained how economically fragile his position was and admitted he didn't know how long he would be able to

keep his workshop open in this manner. Leading him to question how much longer his specific knowledge will be kept alive; a knowledge that is passed down through different generations, and entangled in social structures. Are there new generations that will follow on? If his clients could better understand the relationship between local productions and the knowledge and social structures it empowers, would that change their orders?

These are the indigenous knowledges embodied by craftsmanship, and not something that can be learnt from a book or a YouTube video. It is the knowledge of generations that goes through the body and is best transmitted in the workshop itself; with the materials, tools, their possibilities and limitations, and with human encounters. In the Netherlands (where I grew up) and in Belgium (where I live) I hardly see artisans at work in cities — those at work often serve a more exclusive market. Workshops for wood, metal and leather for instance, are mostly upscaled or have been moved to more industrial areas, or the production is outsourced to low-income-countries. Our dependence on the global market of production has become even more clear during the corona crisis, which fueled a call for local small-scale production. While in the center of cities such as Ramallah, Nablus and Jerusalem one can still (although notably less and less) find several small workshops as part of everyday life; molding metal, making shoes or glazing pottery. To me, this was eye opening; to be aware of these production processes and experience them while passing by or entering the shops introduced me to a rich cultural heritage and made me better understand the social structures that surrounded them, how families are connected, how complicated it can be to transport resources or machines in and products out of the country, how so many artisans have faced military raids in their workspaces and more harsh realities. Alongside this it taught me the effects of colonial occupation and how it oppresses every part of daily life, movement, material, law, economy; everything. This was a fundamental experience. To learn about the occupation through materiality allowed me to deeply see the impact of the disrupted socio-political situation.

To many, the Israel-Palestine 'conflict' emerged mainly from religious or nationalistic issues, while the reality is different because "the occupation is much more related to economic

motives within a capitalist ‘game’”, as is explained by Palestinian permaculture designer Mohammad Saleh. The Israeli economy is directly fed by military technology and security systems, and the private sector plays an explicit role in the Israeli settlement enterprise and in the economic exploitation of Palestinian and Syrian land, labour and resources<sup>1</sup>. As an act of resistance Mohammad Saleh believes it is important to focus on the production of local designs, especially as a way of acting rather than reacting. “With more local production models, we practice crucial steps of self-sovereignty. It will help artisans to sustain their businesses, families and inherited craftsmanship. This empowers a local economy. The design comes from within and relates to local needs and points of view. This is a socially conscious action, rather than a re-action to the behaviours of others.”

With the create shops that Disarming Design from Palestine organizes, we start the design processes with visiting workshops, meeting artisans and listening to their stories, seeing them at work and trying to understand their mechanisms. Most of their knowledge is picked up in practice, in daily life, and not through formal education. As Palestinian designer Qusai Saify explains: „What we learned through working with artisans is to be awake all the time and to be sensitive to each detail you are working on, either how you behave or how you are going to develop the design itself. We live in our heads when we think of a design, but when you really work with the artisans you discover lots of layers. As a designer one can pay attention to the details the artisans are living in and from that you get your feedback to the design itself. If you are aware of this feedback you will learn a lot, if you want to ignore that feedback, or if you are not that sensitive maybe you learn a lot less. Each time something is not working, you need to deal with the situation in a creative way. And with this kind of creativity you don’t have the answer yourself, but you have to find answers together to develop ideas with the artisan. This is a moment when you are reshaping yourself; I felt I was redesigning myself through the designs I was working on.”

Design is a practice of thought and often holds you in a hypothetical individual space behind the computer. When you are working digitally your body often stays more or less in the same position, but when you are making things together your

physical movements become part of the energy of the process. Meeting the artisan brings a complete other dimension. Bodies start to interact, you relate to one another, look one another in the eyes, see one’s hands, and feel the materials. This is a relational design process where the body acts in the design development and becomes an important instrument; a tool to make. There is a physical counterforce of the materials and a social interaction between people with very different skill-sets who normally wouldn’t interact. Often there is a class difference between artisans with lived knowledge and designers from a more formally educated background. They have economic differences, sometimes cultural or racial differences and possibly a language barrier. Visiting the artisan in their working environment places them in the position of strength of knowledge; it puts the skill of crafts and making central to the conversation and allows a mutual space to develop ideas. There is an almost magical exchange taking place in the encounters of testing and making things together; an access to a deeper knowledge, materialized in the acts of making. In doing so, it feels that the moment we better understand how things are made, we achieve a more humane material existence. Making together influences relationships between people and gives space to mediate initial inequalities, therefore allowing for an emancipatory potential. These are precognitive processes that go beyond language, beyond a reflective attitude and offer participation in different ways.

Often in design education the focus is more on aspects of the conceptual, aesthetic or technical, rather than on the role of the body, the sensorial and the design processes that come with it. While this is an important element, even more so when we talk about participative practices and when working with people from different backgrounds. Bodies matter and influence a sense of trust, connectivity and creativity. It’s something we should take into account, question and sensitize while working together in the same space.

## Land & Resources

Some of my most impactful experiences in Palestine were the hikes I made over the green and yellow hills that boasted

century old olive trees, empty riverbeds, rocky landscapes with a vibratory panorama, or walks far below sea level near the Dead Sea. Hiking alone in the West bank is not recommended due to the unpredictable danger of the military occupation. Therefore I joined different groups of people who hike on a weekly basis, to escape the daily tensions and find protection in being together. Each time I walked the landscape it left a deep impression and I was overwhelmed by its scale and history, as well as being witness to the loss of land, the brutal destruction and the theft of water. Along the way I exchanged thoughts with people I had never met before about absolutely anything that had triggered us from what we saw, tasted or smelled. These conversations helped me to relate to the place I was in and to understand the deeply lived relation the people have with it. Many family stories were shared about picking wild herbs, especially 'za'tar', the Palestinian thyme, but also sage and mint – or whatever we could find around to make fresh tea for the shared picknick. I was introduced to new tastes with the carob bean, that looks like dark brow dried pea pod, but has an almost fresh liquorish kind of taste (delicious, especially while hiking). I was bewildered about the sometimes centuries old olive trees that were taken care of continuously, from generation to generation. And I admired the innumerable terraces dotted everywhere around on the hills that looked like geological layers, and realised that each single terrace is human made, over centuries of moving stones, making the soil fertile. But also the barbarous scale of the illegal settlements was visible, as well as the mortal pace with which the water level of the dead sea is falling and I was left in disbelief when my interlocutors were telling me about the new Israeli law that forbids Palestinians to pick wild herbs and plants.

The energy of being outside and walking together is an important condition for relating to each other, and our direct environment. Mohammad Saleh places this partly in the healing capacity of nature: „when negativity started taking over me, I looked inside myself and asked: what am I passionate about? And the answer was nature. And this was the starting point for acting upon my own choices: I created gardens, green spots in the places where I lived. You could think that this is not related to politics, society and psychology, but it is. When a person

finds a green nice spot, this heals him, and in Palestine we are all wounded, so we are all in need of healing. In doing so, I am not reacting to the negative circumstances, which are dictated by others, but still have a crucial impact on them.” What does nature do and how to start as a designer from that perspective? For Qusai Saify social rituals like harvesting, olive picking and hiking are meaningful for new ideas and fundamental insights. He wants to design in a way that supports a basic lifestyle. In the context of Palestine, with its limited access to resources and disrupted import, it is utterly relevant to question how to design with limited as well as local materials.

In a reality where land is so disputed, where grounds are stolen and where history is violently erased, the relation to the place is of existential importance. The land provides existence, identification, and allows one to take root in a place. It can contribute to both healing and self-sovereignty. Therefore, the role of nature, the relation to a place and the understanding of natural cycles is an indispensable aspect in decolonial design learning.

## Storytelling & Identity

How can you speak outside of the questions that are imposed on you, how to make the truth about colonial occupation visible, how to show the human aspect of life in Palestine and how to give just enough information that it doesn't become exploitable in any structure of oppression? During the symposium 'Out of Sight' at the Qattan Foundation in Ramallah in the autumn of 2018, Palestinian filmmaker Kamal Jafari mentioned how several of his friends say that their families hardly ever explained to them what had happened to other family members during the Nakba in 1948<sup>2</sup>. Like his friends, Kamal asked his grandmother several times about what happened to her back then. She was never able to tell him. But then, when she was very old, Kamal decided to film her. This turned out to be the first time that she was able to speak to him: in 1948 she escaped by boat from Haifa towards Lebanon, but there was a big storm so her boat went back to the shore. That is how she survived within the 1948 borders, and not, for instance, end up in a refugee camp in Lebanon. For Kamal this was an important story to contex-

tualize his own identity. He stressed how important it is as a filmmaker to share and express how people experience something, and what such a situation means on a human level.

Storytelling can be seen as a form of resilience and resistance, because it also allows space for the expression of identity, which is both problematic and vital if these identities are marginalized. Interior designer Ghadeer Dajani says that the stories don't need to always be about Palestine, "because sometimes we become prisoners in this circle of expectation that if you are a Palestinian then all your work has to be about Palestine. This can be too much, too intensive. Sometimes you need to detach yourself from the political situation, from occupation, from colonization, and design something just for the sake of designing." Areej Ashab mentions how she experienced this as a Palestinian student in an Israeli institution in Jerusalem:

"Sometimes we are seen more as Palestinians than as design students and we are pushed to deal with issues related to the political situation and how it affects our lives. As we become subjects of exoticism, sometimes it is more interesting for them [Israeli teachers] to hear us talking about what we go through rather than listening to what Israelis do. This perception puts us in uncomfortable situations having to always confront and expose the conflicted reality we live in. They see it from a very orientalist point of view, and through our reflection in their eyes we fear we also adopt this point of view. This issue is very sensitive and it's important to think about it in relation to design education; how can we remove ourselves from this identity and try to be just designers, just ourselves?"

During her participation in the interdisciplinary create shops, together with foreign participants Areej valued the exchange. "It was interesting to see how international designers translated the reality they see here, compared to those of us who had always lived here and who often take for granted how we live. Together this resulted in interesting products and life-changing experiences." For instance, when the participants of the create shop passed the checkpoint in Qalandia, the international students were deeply shocked about the system, the way people are treated like animals and the inhumane confrontation with security. Together with Areej, they kept on talking about this experience and it led to the design of the 'Checkpoint

bag'; a leather backpack to support passing the checkpoint, and in doing so expressing part of the lived experience, by adding special details and a hidden message that is only visible under the x-ray; a silhouette of some old keys as a symbol for the right to return for refugees.

Although many of the cultural exchanges in our create shops have been considered positive, there have also been problematic moments. In some occasions the question of 'the outsider' was perceived as violent or disruptive to the safe atmosphere of the shared space. It can be a burden to teach others and to detail your own oppression, or experience of racism. One's stories can become just a recording for others who are not part of your reality, especially in a context in which "the westerner" is always the privileged party. Therefore, we talked a lot about how we can secure an equal space for learning and commitment with a group of people with very different lived realities, traumas, privileges and education. How we transfer a real understanding of a situation; how you can help in imagining it, feeling it, emerging through it. And how design can tell stories, fundamental stories of what it means to be in an oppressed position and how a political situation affects people's lives.

## Solidarity & Resistance

Palestine has a very different context to Europe; geographically, politically, economically, historically and colonially. It is a reality where systems of oppression, exclusion and violence play distinct roles. Settler colonialism has resulted in the cultural, social, and physical displacement of indigenous peoples. In order to rationalize this violence, settler colonialism relies on narratives of hierarchical power that inevitably positions the settler state and its stakeholders at the top. It is a complicated and often difficult geo-political situation that makes Palestine a unique case; it is colonialism, but it is also not. It is post colonialism, but it is also not. From the outside it's hard to understand what it means to grow up on the inside. But if one begins to understand the colonial and military situation in Palestine, then many other patterns of oppression, class, and colonial or postcolonial struc-

tures become tragically visible. This allows for a deeper understanding that can inform a more conscious design practice dislodging dominant and oppressive colonial narratives, one that can imagine and also enact the world differently.

The experiences and encounters in Palestine have changed me, as a person and profoundly as a designer. It made me realize how my aims for quality were rooted in a modernist ideology and were far from inclusive. By working so closely with designers and artisans in Palestine, beyond the aesthetic and conceptual facets, I learned to value the relational and participatory potential of design, and how meaning and narratives are shaped through contexts and connections. Things are their relations; nothing exists by itself; everything is interconnected.

It often confronted me with my own privileged, and sometimes ignorant, position as a white European in a racially and violently occupied reality. When I visit Palestine with a group of “Western” designers, it is important to think of how to avoid reproducing colonial structures, instrumentalization or disruptive power relations. I became aware of pedagogical tools for engaged design practices where students come to realize their social and political position and the power structures they function within, giving space to other knowledges through a design process. It allowed us to move beyond existing definitions of both design and the political, and focus on stimulating international collaborations of solidarity. However, simply learning about colonial power relations does not in itself necessarily disrupt the dominant frames of knowing and being that are themselves made through those warped relations.

Design has the potential to respectfully relate to, and innovate local traditions of production, so as to value them within our current times and within their political dimensions. Thinking through design, rather than through words, allows the language and structure of design to engage different people and histories. It favours methods of working bottom-up within situated design methods and enables design as a praxis of world making. If we talk about conservatism as the conserving of traditional values, it is specifically this aspect that I want to put forward, and for which I call on designers to think critically about in their own practices. To better understand which systems they are

serving with their work. If we all do so, we might counteract the conservative neo-liberal systems that dominate the markets and that feed into subsequent systems of exploitation and suppression.

1  
<https://whoprofits.org>

2  
The 1948 Palestinian exodus, also known as the Nakba (Arabic: النكبة, al-Nakbah, literally “disaster”, “catastrophe”, or “cataclysm”), occurred when more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs — about half of prewar Palestine’s Arab population — forceful fled or were expelled from their homes, during the 1948 Palestine war. Between 400 and 600 Palestinian villages were sacked during the war, while urban Palestine was almost entirely extinguished. The term nakba also refers to the period of war itself and events affecting Palestinians from December 1947 to January 1949.

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fig. 2



fig. 1



fig. 3

fig. 1

Designer Ayat Bader (PS) at Jaba Glass  
Factory (PS).

Photography: Florian Mecklenburg

fig. 2

Worksdiscussion during create shop in  
Jerusalem, 2015

Photography: Mohammad Saleh

fig. 3

Hiking in Battir (near Bethlehem).

Photography: Teresa Palmieri