

Pastiche of Threats: A Spatial Analysis of Military Urban Training Centres

Amsterdam Museum Journal

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Discipline

Spatial/Urban Planning and Cultural analysis

Keywords

Military Urban Training Centers / Pastiche / Israel /
Spatial Imaginaries

Doi

doi.org/10.61299/8i_h91

Issue #1 Fall 2023

Abstract

This paper focuses on two case studies of urban military training centres, representing different combat scenarios, and generating different imaginary spatial manifestations. Using maps, drawings, photographs, and 3D models, we analyse how the architectural and urban characteristics of both cases inform the manner in which Arab built space is simultaneously conceived and perceived as what we develop in this paper as a pastiche of threats, violence, and domination. Approaching the issue from a spatial perspective, we address the materials used in each space; how spaces were planned in relation to combat legacies, and how their planners ignored non-combatant usage of public space in their creation of civilian-like military infrastructure. At the same time, we wish to address the never-ending “passion for the Real”, which cannot be satisfied by any simulacra. By doing so, we map out the way abstract imaginaries are manifested and materialized spatially, attending almost literally to the “architecture of vision” involved in contemporary practices of power.

Introduction

“Usually we say that we should not mistake fiction for reality ... The lesson ... is the opposite one: We should not mistake reality for fiction ... Much more difficult than to denounce/unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize the part of fiction in ‘real’ reality” (Žižek 93–94).

On 10 November 2021, soldiers and armoured personnel conducted a military training simulating counter-guerrilla combat in Umm al-Fahm, the second largest Arab city in Israel with over 56.000 citizens. Responding to a court appeal, the army defended this act by arguing that the alleyways in Umm al-Fahm “recalled southern Lebanon” (Galon; ACRI). This answer encapsulates the spatial form of the denaturalization of Arab citizens of Israel and their framing as potential enemies of the state. It is especially confounding since Israel has built, since the early 2000s, military training centres that purportedly simulate southern Lebanese urban and rural design, which should, in principle, make such infringement on the fabric of civilian daily life, unnecessary.

For our contribution to the volume *War, Conflict and the City*, we take this incident as our point of departure, and offer a spatial analysis of Military Operations Urban Training Centres (MOUTs): imaginary urban environments for military training that are created in order to prepare soldiers for wars in built contexts. As we will argue, the logic of these centres’ spatial design spills over into the lived environment and grounds a fetishized reading of reality. This paper focuses on both the superimposition of (militarized) images on (civilian) urban life, and on moments of friction when such superimpositions expose themselves. It begins with exploring the phenomenon of urban combat training centres and then discusses its manifestation and relevance in Israel. Examining the case studies of *Al Furan* and *Chicago* (MOUTs), we argue that the Arab built environment is simultaneously perceived and conceived as a *pastiche of threats*, that eventually creates a new Real space.

War and the City: The Global Phenomenon of Urban Training Centres

Since the early 2000s, there has been a global surge in the construction of Military Operation Urban Training Centres (MOUTs). From Muscatatuck centre in Indiana, US, through Schnöggersburg in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany (Müller; Bunderswehr), and to Tzeelim in Israel, the financial investment in the construction of these centres is often staged around the

argument that modern combat has moved from open territory into urban environments, a change that comes with the challenge of facing civilian population next to fighters during combat (Roei, 'One Map, Multiple Legends'). This challenge, in turn, necessitates a training area that can offer soldiers "the tools they need before taking foot *in the battlefields of the 21st century*" (our emphasis) (IDF). The idea, as each site bolsters online, is to enable the practice of security routines with minimal infringement on urban and rural civilian life. For this purpose, the different training sites proclaim to stage authentic spatial experiences, offering users "globally unique, urban and rural, multi-domain operating environments", in order to "maintain ... humane armies by actively avoiding unnecessary civilian casualties" and to serve "those who work to defend the homeland and win the peace" (Atterbury-Muscatatuck Training Center).

The question of 'war and the city', then, is an urgent question for military and security stakeholders, in ways that may remain invisible to the civilian eye. It seems urgent to address how some cities are now approached by governments and global powers as sites of potential combat, and more specifically, how this approach becomes naturalized and disseminated through spatial design that superimposes itself on lived space. Critical research that emerged parallel to the construction of the training centres points to the problematic ways in which they are not as harmless as they contend to be (Frohne; Brownfield-Stein; Graham, 'Cities and the "War on Terror"'; Graham, *Cities under Siege*). Stephen Graham, specifically, is explicit on the darker elements that are involved in creating a mock-Arab city that is imagined and designed through the gun's barrel. Saturated with spatial stereotypes, especially in relation to the global war on terror, these simulated urban structures complement the "widespread demonisation of entire Islamic cities as 'terrorist' or barbarian 'nests'" in ways that help to legitimise the use of massive forces by Western armies on Islamic cities:

"Replete with minarets, pyrotechnic systems, loop tapes with calls to prayer, donkeys, and hired 'civilians' in Islamic dress wandering through narrow streets, and olfactory machines to create the smell of rotting corpses, this shadow urban system works like some bastard child of Disney. It simulates, of course, not the complex cultural, social, or physical realities of Middle Eastern urbanism, but the imaginative geographies of the military and theme-park designers who are brought in to design and construct it" (Graham, "Cities and the 'War on Terror'" 5-6).

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In what follows, we wish to complement the work done by Graham and others on the acclimating effects that training centres have on urban destruction during combat (see also Weizman, 'Walking through Walls'; Roei, 'One Map, Multiple Legends'; Weizman, *Hollow Land*) by focusing specifically on their spatial and architectural design. Furthermore, rather than following a binary logic that counters real and simulated space, a logic that can be traced in the arguments of both advocates and critics of MOUTs, we approach the mock cities of the training centres as a node on a spectrum of military-civilian spatial imaginaries (Woodward). We are especially interested in the more mundane ways in which urban fabrics of life are affected and engineered through combat scenarios. We trace a continuum of lived and imagined uses of space that make up the impossible quest for the perfect dystopian city. Employing Slavoj Žižek's reflection on "the passion of the Real", we continue to ask how "racist imaginative geographies" (Graham, 'Remember Fallujah' 5) are managed and maintained in lived urban environments outside the spectacular moment of war.

Zooming In: Israeli Militarised Civic Geographies

While military urban training centres can be found all across the Global North, the Israeli case is especially revealing for two central reasons. Firstly, in Israel, there is an unusual spatial proximity between training spaces and the cities and villages that they are supposed to simulate. The imaginary scenarios involving Gaza, south Lebanon, or Nablus, are never more than a few hundred kilometres from their spatial referent. In some cases, such as *Al Furan*, training centres are (nick)named after dwelling areas that are only a few hundred meters away.

Secondly, and more importantly perhaps, the boundary between civilian and military (uses of) space in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories has always been blurred (Tzfadia 46,62). Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories were justified as essential elements of security; while large open spaces that are reserved for military training during the week, are open to visitors for hikes and picnics during weekends and holidays. Armed soldiers in uniform make up part of daily urban scenarios and can be spotted in cafes, museums, and university classes; and the military ethos plays a major role in the recent widespread civil demonstrations against current governmental plans that threaten civil rights and freedoms. Baruch Kimmerling's insight, now three decades old, that "Israeli militarism tends to serve as one of the central organization principles of the society" did not lose its relevance (Kimmerling 199; Roei, *Civic Aesthetics*). Erez Tzfadia's geographical take on this thesis expounds on the way military-inflected

constructions of space naturalize further the military's status as a guiding principle of daily life (Tzfadia 356–57).

“A nation builds an army (that) builds a nation” is one of the main slogans of the IDF education corps (Schwake, ‘An Officer and a Bourgeois’). Despite its seeming affiliation to the nation-building years of the 1950s, it is actually a new motto, coined in the early 2000s, more than 50 years after the famous recruitment posters of the 1948 War stating that “the whole country is a front, the whole nation is an army”. While both phrases depict a long standing connection between the nation and its armed forces, the more recent one crystallizes more poignantly the reciprocal relationship between the Israeli civic and martial spheres and the way in which the first forms the latter, and the latter eventually forms the first (Kimmerling; Schwake, *Dwelling on the Green Line*). As a society in a constant state of perceived existential threat, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) forms a leading political and cultural agent, playing an integral part in the nation-building process and enjoying an undisputable cultural status. As shown by Kimmerling, the militarization of Israel is not seen only in the sustained nation-army model and the active conscription duty, but also in the implementation of military concepts, perspective, and discourse in civil society (Kimmerling). To some extent, and referring to Foucault's famous rephrasing of Clausewitz, Israeli civilian everyday life is the continuation of war by other means (Foucault). Within this spatial and temporal framework, military training scenarios, and in our case, the simulations of Arab built space, re-enter the civilian mindset, contributing to their referent's perception as an environment of threat, violence, and domination.

In the occupied Palestinian territories, the infringement of military actions on civilian fabrics of life are more blatant and brutal, ranging from blocking access to privately owned agricultural lands, limiting access to public streets, and occupying private homes, to conducting night arrests, house demolitions and the banning of the right to protest (B'Tselem, ‘Homepage’). Therefore, if the 1967 and 1973 Israel-Arab wars comprised a series of battles between regular armies, then the succeeding conflicts, especially with growing Palestinian militias' call for an independent armed struggle, led to battles with irregular forces and paramilitary organisations. As a result, the battlefield shifted from the open fields of Sinai and the Golan Heights to the towns and villages of southern Lebanon, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, leading to the further militarisation of Arab built space.

Pastiche of Threats and the Pursuit of the Real:

Constructing the Idealized Dystopian City

The sites of *Al Furan* and *Chicago* are two different case studies that despite their morphological differences illustrate the common way in which the IDF perceives Arab built space. Built after the events of the Second Intifada and under the influence of the 2006 invasion of Lebanon which signified the growing significance of urban and close-quarters combat, *Al Furan* and *Chicago* pinpoint the new role that Arab built space began to play in Israeli warfare tactics.¹ Namely, they signal the turning from what James Ron defines as a *ghetto*, a segregated area excluded from mainstream society and controlled through constant policing, into a *frontier*, an area outside of the state's direct sovereignty in which it expresses its power in sporadic, but significantly fiercer forms of violence (Ron). Accordingly, if in the early 1990s Israeli soldiers roamed the streets of Gaza and other cities of the occupied Palestinian West Bank, on foot and wearing berets, ten years later this would give way to full technical gear and armoured convoys. And while close-combat and urban warfare techniques were reserved mainly for special operations, by the early 2000s this has become a central aspect in almost all combatant units; putting behind the famous tank and infantry battles in open spaces and entering an era where built space forms the main fighting scene.

The location and administering groups in charge of each of the sites are supposed to involve distinct future battlefields, consisting of dissimilar enemies, threats, and warfare, as well as natural and built environments. *Chicago* is located in the IDF Ground Forces' main training area, adjacent to Kibbutz Ze'elim in the southern Negev. As such, it is to be used by all units belonging to ground forces and address the different combat scenarios these units might face. Correspondingly, it is an abstract Arab space: it could be Nablus, Gaza, Bint Jbeil in Lebanon, and even Baghdad, when considering US involvement in the site's construction (see also Bishop). *Al Furan* on the other hand is more case specific and thus smaller in terms of scale. It is located in the occupied Golan Heights, subject to the control of IDF Northern Command, and named after a mispronunciation of the nearby remains of the depopulated Syrian village of Al Furn. With its affiliation to the Northern Command, the facility is supposed to mimic a typical village in southern Lebanon and includes a series of underground tunnels as used by the Shia militia of Hezbollah.²

A superficial gaze of both case studies (see figures 1 and 2) suggests that they simulate an apparently representative Arab, Palestinian or

Lebanese, city or village. Bringing Kevin Lynch's famous concept of the "image" of a city, represented through paths (the routes people take), districts (distinct neighbourhoods or areas), edges (the boundaries between different areas), nodes (important junctions or gathering places), and landmarks (prominent physical features) (Lynch), one can clearly identify these elements in both *Chicago* and *Al Furan*. Accordingly, both sites consist of a main landmark and node in their centre in the form of a mosque and a public square, a system of paths comprising main access roads and alleys, and distinct districts that are demarcated by clear edges. To this extent, one might get the impression that these are actually replicas of existing localities.



Figure 1: *Chicago training area, outside of Kibbutz Ze'elim, 2022 (govmap).*



Figure 2: *Al Furan training area, marked in red, and the ruins of Al Furan village in dashed red line (govmap, edited by the authors).*

However, a closer look reveals that both sites are actually what Frederic Jameson defines as a pastiche, a design that borrows and combines different architectural styles and elements from a variety of historical periods, which he claims to be a characteristic phenomenon of postmodernism (Jameson 111–25). Building on Jameson, *Al Furan* and *Chicago* can be understood as spatial pastiches: outcomes of checklists that include so-called typical Arab elements, which create the eventual representative image of a typical Arab space, yet lack its inherent hierarchy, development logic, and authenticity. Nevertheless, if in Jameson's understanding pastiche is a way to commodify cultural forms by turning them into consumer products, endlessly recombined and remixed, when it comes to our case studies, pastiche forms a way to flatten and objectify perceived Arab space, enabling its recurrent appropriation and occupation. If the pastiche Jameson envisioned has the potential to eventually challenge traditional notions of authenticity, the spatial pastiche of *Al Furan* and *Chicago* creates a new reality that challenges the 'realness' of the actual spaces it mimics (see figure 3).

Crucially, the pastiche that defines both case studies, is not simply related to typical Arab spatial elements, but rather and more specifically to *threats* soldiers might encounter in Arab built space. The difference is not merely semantic: it informs the rationale behind the planning of both sites, as well as the spatial logic they rely on. Accordingly, the spatial designs of



Figure 3: Police training exercise simulating violent civil unrest, held at the Ze'elim army base in the Negev, Moshe Milner, 2008 (GPO, Israel).¹



Figure 4: One of the 'smaller' compounds in Al Furan Training Centre, 2019 (IDF).

the small-scale and fragmented areas in *Chicago* do not represent common Arab Qasbas,⁴ or Palestinian refugee camps, but rather the typical threats an Israeli combating unit might encounter when entering such areas. With this mindset, the image of the traditional villages or historic centres for example, which are outcomes of complex networks and customs, gives way to the need to create the different martial scenes that deployed units need to practice and be prepared for, whether in manoeuvring in open areas while being controlled by surrounding buildings, entering and taking control of buildings, or being threatened from the surrounding environment while occupying a building. The same logic is applied in the areas of larger scale buildings, and the alleged 'city centres', adjacent to the 'main mosques', making this 'city' into an amusement park of battle scenes, already on the level of urban design, before any additional performative elements enter it (see Graham). *Al Furan*, due to its simpler structure, illustrates this even more clearly. It comprises four main areas, that initially might look similar as they include buildings of the same scale, yet their placement implies the different abovementioned battle scenarios they are supposed to represent (see figure 4).

This *pastiche of threats* does not remain on the level of overall urban design as it continues to also dictate the architectural design of the different individual buildings, in both case studies. From the outside, the openings, orientation, height, and volume, are designed to create a variety of threats to the forces manoeuvring throughout the facility. Windows, balconies, and roofs in different heights are not intended to mimic an ideal picturesque

scenery of an Arab lived space but to illustrate the different spots one needs to cover. Accordingly, the basic unit in *Al Furan*, is reproduced to create an inventory of threats, enhancing the different fighting scenes that need to be practised (see figure 5). Similar, yet more complex, *Chicago* consists of several basic living units, generating a larger inventory of threats and accompanying combatant scenarios (see figure 6). The same logic is applied to the internal divisions that characterise these buildings, which hardly resemble actual housing units as they include only the elements that are relevant to simulating the dangers a force entering a house should watch out from, such as stairs and upper storage areas. In a way, it is in the transformation of the interior of an Arab house into a simple list of targets, vulnerabilities, and potential hazards, that the logic of a pastiche of threats presents itself most clearly. What was applied on the level of the single building, repeats itself on the level of the district, and the entire facility.

As a theme parks of urban threats, *Chicago* and *Al Furan* form an idealized dystopian imagined space, in which the pursuit of the Real could constantly take place. Not surprisingly, *Chicago* was used as the set for the third season of the popular Netflix series *Fauda* (War Cities), which follows an elite Israeli undercover unit's operation in the Occupied Territories. The

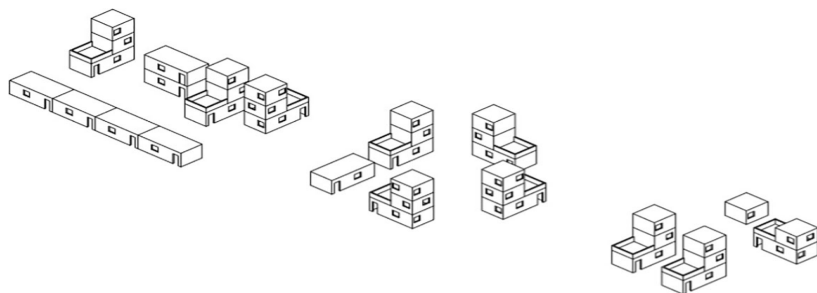


Figure 5: Basic unit and different settings in *Al Furan* (illustrated by the authors).

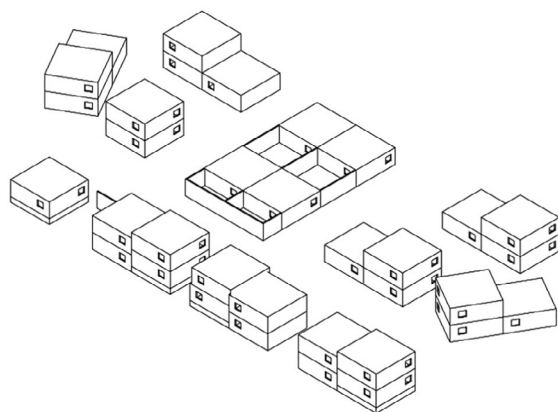


Figure 6: Basic unit and different settings in *Chicago* (Illustrated by the authors).

first two seasons focused on the West Bank and were filmed in Palestinian localities within Israeli borders; the third focused on Gaza, a place outside of the common Israeli cognitive map, and a more ‘foreign’ set needed to be found, causing the production to choose this site of *Chicago* as a replica of Gaza. In that sense, *Chicago* became ‘more real than the real’, demonstrating how the theme park of urban combat eventually turned from a simulation into a simulacra, a fabricated reality that sooner or later replaces its referent (Baudrillard; Frohne).

On Authenticity, Or, Why Shadow Cities are not Enough

The *Chicago* training centre is bolstered in the media as helping soldiers to “actively [avoid] unnecessary civilian casualties” by distinguishing terrorists from city residents. Yet, we argue, in their design of Arab urban dwellings – from the single unit to the broader distribution of space – as spaces of threat, *Chicago* and *Al Furan* work, in practice, to undermine the distinction between the enemy combatant and city dweller. Rather than replicating lived space, the centres modulate village- and city- designs according to a biased militaristic perspective that re-construct lived space first and foremost as a potential combat zone. Contrary to their promise, then, the only authenticity offered by the MOUTs has to do with their reliable display of militaristic dystopian spatial perspectives.

An acknowledgement of the military’s own realization of the incompleteness of MOUT imaginaries, regardless of how much effort has been put into creating the ultimate authentic experience, is to be found in its continuous training outside of the centres. The case of Umm al-Fahm, with which we opened this paper, is only one amongst numerous recent military exercises and events reported to take place within Palestinian and settler lived spaces (Breiner and Shezaf; Levy and Levac; Gili). Seeing as such exercises clearly infringe on the daily life of inhabitants, and have long-lasting effects, one must ask, what is it that remained missing from the military spatial experience, in city models that were constructed to answer to its every need?⁵

A preliminary answer to this conundrum can be found in Slavoj Žižek’s conceptualization of the “Passion of the Real”. Addressing the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers in New York and their aftermath, Žižek expounds on the impossible quest to capture raw experience in images or language. Any such quest for raw experience, emanates from a suspicion of representation’s ability to capture reality, but ends up being a passion for semblance, a quest for the perfect image:

“On today’s market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary definition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics ... reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real ... What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity” (Žižek 90).⁶

From Žižek’s perspective, the urban training centres are another version of contemporary postmodern products: coffee without caffeine, empty Arab ‘enemy’ cities without inhabitant killjoys or spatial designs that would destabilize the connotation of the surrounding as combat space. Furthermore, and more importantly, translating Žižek’s conceptualization to our case, it is easier to see how the training centres’ virtual semblance of lived space fuels the continuous need to experience ‘real reality’ (in our case, lived urban and rural Arab spaces) in light of its virtual image. To paraphrase Žižek, in contrast to the Barthesian reality effect, where details in the urban training centres make us accept their fictional scenarios as real, here, lived experience itself, that is, urban fabrics of Arab cities and villages under occupation regime, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived within the imaginary prism of the architecture of threat (Žižek 93).

The persistent military exercise in lived spaces, which should be deemed unnecessary after the construction of the training centres, now makes sense. As a node in the process of “the passion for semblance” and its continuous search for the perfect image, lived cities are addressed as versions of training centres, and not the other way around.

Conclusion

In May 2022, half a year after the military training at Umm al-Fahm with which we opened this paper, another military exercise was set to take place in the city, as part of a larger drill named “Chariots of Fire,” that was spread across different locations in Israel and the Occupied Territories, simulating a multi-front war (Jerusalem Post). However, this time, the drill in Umm al-Fahm was cancelled at the request of the city mayor Samir Sobhi Mahamed. In his letter, Mahamed wrote,

“I, the city council, and the residents of Umm el-Fahm are strongly opposed to conducting the military drill inside the city, and we have made our position known to the relevant military officials ... Needless to say, moving armored personnel carriers inside the city that simulates a battle against Hezbollah has a dramatic effect on the feelings of the residents” (Ahronheim, 18 May 2022).

Crucially, Mahamed points out in his letter that the problem lies not (only) in the clash between soldiers and civilians *during* the simulation, but in the effects that the simulation may carry *after* the drill is over and done with. He writes,

“As mayor of the city, I do everything within my power to promote co-existence and improve the image of the city as well as the quality of life within it. And I am afraid these kinds of military exercises are harmful to those goals ... There is a good chance that an 18-year-old soldier or a hi-tech entrepreneur who takes part in the exercise to ‘conquer the enemy’ will have difficulty changing his view that Umm el-Fahm is the enemy even after the drill, and all our efforts to bring about ... economic growth and an improvement of Umm el-Fahm’s image will go by the wayside” (Ahronheim, 18 May 2022).

To our mind, Mahamed’s letter encapsulates the issue at stake most clearly, and points to the ways in which military training centres cast their shadow over Arab lived space in Israel, not to mention the Occupied Territories and actual urban combat.⁷ While in May 2022, the military drill moved away from Umm al-Fahm, it did take place in and near other Arab villages in Lower Galilee and the Wadi Ara region. The structural approach to Arab lived environment as spaces of threat, prevailed.

The simulation of war in the city is, then, located on a continuum that superimposes the simulated military pastiche of threat scenarios – and the racist imaginative geographies they carry – over into lived urban space. The effects of such superimposition remain in place long after the training is concluded whether in the form of a popular TV series, or in the form of a fading respect for urban spaces and the fabric of daily life they contain.

“Saturated with spatial stereotypes, especially in relation to the global war on terror, these simulated urban structures complement the “widespread demonisation of entire Islamic cities as ‘terrorist’ or barbarian ‘nests’” in ways that help to legitimise the use of massive forces by Western armies on Islamic cities (Graham).”

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Endnotes

- ¹ The Second Intifada (In Arabic the Aqsa Intifada or Intifada al Aqsa) is a term used to refer to the violent clashes between Israel and the different Palestinian organisations (including the Palestinian Authority) during 2000–2005. It began as a civil uprising, but evolved into armed clashes, shootings, bombings, and suicide attacks from the Palestinian side and sieges, arrests, and airstrikes from the Israeli side, and led eventually to the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip and the construction of the West Bank barrier. The 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon (referred to by Israel as the Second Lebanon War and in Lebanon as the 34-Day War or the July War) is a series of skirmishes, battles, and clashes between Israel and the Hezbollah Militia during the summer of 2006, in Lebanon and northern Israel.
- ² A Lebanese Shia militia and political party (literally meaning the Party of God), established in 1982 following Israel's invasion of Lebanon. It formed one of the main resisting forces to Israeli presence in Lebanon, and since the 1980s it has turned into one of the country's most influential political organizations.
- ³ The 'explosions' in the walls, embedding the fighting tactic of passing through the walls into the architecture of the building and highlighting the

perception of the 'Arab' house as an object of conflict designed through the perspective of warfare.

- ⁴ Historical city centers or villages, characterized by traditional architecture, which includes narrow streets and closely clustered buildings.
- ⁵ One answer to this question, that will not be pursued further in this contribution, is the employment of military training as part of a practice of land confiscation. Our focus here remains on the ways in which urban spaces are re-configured according to military imaginaries. For more on military training area in relation to land confiscation in the past and in the present see for example Tzfadia; Hass.
- ⁶ For Žižek, 9/11's traumatic affect is created in part in relation to its constant a-priory imaginings in visual culture: "For the great majority of the public, the World Trade Center explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophic movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since – as Jeremy Bentham knew – reality is the best appearance of itself?" (Žižek 90).
- ⁷ On this note see for example (B'Tselem, 'Jenin Refugee Camp Is Not a Battlefield - It Is the Home of Thousands of People').