
CITY RESILIENCE AMID MODERN URBAN WARFARE: THE CASE OF NABLUS, PALESTINE

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Cities across the globe are increasingly becoming the main theatres of modern warfare. Reviewing the 15 largest conflicts in the world in which the International Committee of the Red Cross is active today, the most remarkable sites that emerge are urban centres. With the tremendous increase of urban crowdedness and violence, international aid and relief is becoming more challenging, less affordable and riskier. Relying on international relief leads to increased casualties; therefore, there is a need for exploring latent possibilities and alternatives that the city itself can offer. In this paper, I examine whether the city fabric influences the resilience capacity of an urban environment, taking the case of the city of Nablus in Palestine. Nablus is a hotspot of the ongoing, 68-year Palestine/Israel conflict that has experienced several forms and waves of disorder and urban combat. This paper concludes that the urban tissue and architectural features of the city's buildings influence the people's capacity for coping with the state of exception. It shows that old town tissue can function and survive longer than a modern city during times of siege, curfew and short invasions.

Keywords

urban warfare, resilience, Nablus, old town

How to Cite

Abdallahman, Kittana. "City Resilience amid Modern Urban Warfare: the case of Nablus, Palestine". In Carola Hein (ed.) *International Planning History Society Proceedings*, 17th IPHS Conference, History-Urbanism-Resilience, TU Delft 17-21 July 2016, V.03 p.423, TU Delft Open, 2016.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7480/iphs.2016.3.1275>

INTRODUCTION

Cities across the globe are increasingly becoming the main theatres of modern warfare. The fifteen largest conflicts in the world in which ICRC¹ is active today, the most noteworthy sites that emerge are urban centres². Cities like Gaza, Aleppo, Donetsk and Aden are enduring the hardest consequences of prolonged conflicts that transform the spaces of the everyday life into a confrontation with the most existential challenge: the survival of the city dwellers.

A few days before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Taha Yasin Ramadan – then Iraq’s Vice President - envisioned the future of battlefields in the Middle East: “We let them go for a walk in the desert, but all our towns will resist”³. Thirteen years later, the cities of the Middle East are overwhelmed by intensive unprecedented urban combat that has completely annihilated entire urban zones, slaughtered hundreds of thousands and displaced millions from their homes. Ramadan’s statement heralded a new era of state defence; the State is no longer defending its cities with its National Army; instead, the State is defended city by city and street by street through decentralized armed groups of regular soldiers and armed civilians, blurring the traditional separation between military and civil spheres. As such, homes, markets, civic buildings and even hospitals are not only shelled from a distance, but are also transformed into ‘miniature’ battlefields.

Historically, a fundamental duty of armies has been defending or attacking cities⁴, which indicates that the relationship between City and War is a bond as old as humanity itself. This bond has passed through different stages, and developed in a manner that has influenced both the shape and structure of the City as well as those of military strategy.

Michael Evans⁵ claims that the attention to the capability of the city to act as a battle space was introduced by European social revolutionaries between 1815 and 1918. They considered the city as a seedbed for armed revolution and tried to examine the relationship between insurrection techniques and street fighting. As social revolutions preferred the city as a new arena for confrontation, the pacification of such revolutions brought soldiers to fight inside the city. The first manual of ‘urban military operations’ was a product of colonial forces; namely, Bugeaud’s 1847 street-fighting manual entitled, *La Guerre des rues* (The War of the Streets), it was based on French military tactics to overcome the Algerian resistance leader Abd el-Kader in the city of Algiers. DiMarco⁶ claims that Bugeaud’s principles were also used in suppressing the French revolts in the mid of 19th century in Paris. The notion of “military operation as urban design” is in fact describing Bugeaud’s counter-revolution tactics. DiMarco adds that Baron Haussmann was heavily influenced by those principles, which feature in his innovative plans for the city of Paris. This implies that the pacification of social revolution might have directly influenced the development of modern urban planning.

The nature and tactics of modern urban warfare, as witnessed since the beginning of WWII, have differed significantly from those of ancient, medieval and early modern urban fighting tactics; the frontier lines have not only moved from the fields to the city boundaries, but also from city walls to city streets⁷. World War II has provided numerous and varied cases of direct combat inside the cityscape.

In the post-Cold War era, a new type of warfare emerged, and cities have become the key sites of it; “Warfare, like everything else, is being urbanised”⁸. Wars are now entering cities from within; city spaces, public and private spheres, places of everyday life and urban services have emerged as the new sites of war. New military theorists speak of a new (fourth) generation of warfare based on “unconventional wars” where state armies fight against informal combatants or mobilized civilians⁹. This new generation of war has led to a perception of the city as the “very medium of warfare- a flexible, almost liquid medium that is forever contingent and in flux”¹⁰.



FIGURE 1 Location of Nablus.



FIGURE 2 an aerial photo showing the old town and modern urban sprawl of Nablus city.

As the city is still expected to be the theatre of contemporary and future warfare, its resilience capacity has to be revisited. While military academia is tackling city defence and offense rigorously, the city capacity to survive times of war has to expand beyond military answers; the mutual relationship between city shape and war technology needs to be revisited from a civic perspective.

“Modern warfare – in all its splintered, increasingly urban messiness – has altered the humanitarian space, changing the world of emergency relief beyond recognition”, says ICRC head Peter Maurer¹¹. With the tremendous increase of urban crowdedness and violence, international aid and relief is becoming more challenging. Maurer claims that modern warfare has altered the humanitarian space by creating high demands on relief and repairs for cities subject to bombing and deterioration while still being inhabited by their citizens. Moreover, the complexities of delivering aid to insecure environments have pushed up the costs of humanitarian work at a rate that has outpaced increases in funding by donors¹². Not surprisingly then, relying on international relief leads to increase casualties. Thus, there is a need to explore latent possibilities and alternatives that the city itself can offer.

LEARNING FROM THE CITY OF NABLUS

The Palestine/Israel conflict presents multiple forms of urban conflict, ranging from civil disobedience to destructive war like the case in Gaza 2014. The city of Nablus represents a hotspot of this ongoing 68-years conflict; it has experienced several forms and waves of disorder and urban combat.

During the second Palestinian Intifada¹³, which escalated in 2000, Nablus had been presented as the incubator of Palestinian resistance in the West Bank. The casbah of Nablus is characterized by a traditional Islamic/Mediterranean tissue; a dense and complex morphology that attracted the Palestinian resistance to take refuge in its compact environment¹⁴.

The Israeli Army, in its attempts to suppress the Palestinian Intifada, found no solution but to attack the ‘heart and guts’ of the revolution. In the summer of 2001, following the escalation of the Intifada, the Israeli forces imposed a tight siege on the city, transforming it into a huge open-air prison. All entry points to the city were blocked and a network of control was installed in the surrounding hills and countryside. In April 2002, the Israeli army invaded most Palestinian cities within the so-called ‘Operation Defensive Shield’, Eyal Weizman in his article “walking through walls” has shown that prior to that attack the army officers had understood the urban fighting in the casbah of Nablus as a spatial problem; the tactic of ‘walking through walls’ became their solution.

After this large and harsh invasion of the city, Nablus has witnessed several and successive incursions and prolonged curfews; in some cases lasting for three months. Nurhan Abujidi described several patterns of invasion. The long-term invasion, which may last for several weeks, is normally implemented by imposing a tight siege and curfew on the casbah of Nablus in addition to other areas of the city. The short-term invasion, which may last for few days, is also accompanied by imposed curfew and siege around specific neighbourhoods of the city. The overnight incursion normally lasts for one night starting from midnight and concluding at dawn. This type of incursion became a regular pattern that is still applied today. Finally, the daylight incursion occurs during the working hours of the day, its main aim being detention of suspects or imposing a state of disturbance on everyday life¹⁵.

Nablus city comprises three different urban fabrics; the old town, the modern city and four refugee camps, however, in this article I focus on the old town and the modern city only, starting by a brief about their architectural and urban characters.

THE OLD TOWN:

The casbah, of less than three kilometres square, is a living organ, functioning with its residential, commercial, industrial, cultural, religious and open spaces. It caters to its residents’ everyday needs within walking distance. Despite the lack of overall design and layout, its construction was not as spontaneous as might be imagined, but rather incremental, accumulative and undertaken with an awareness of the surroundings. In her unpublished master thesis, Thaera Bliebleh¹⁶ studied the architectural contents of the Ottoman religious court’s records in the city of Nablus, from which she induced several guiding principles for the casbah’s construction. These records reveal that expansion of the city buildings was flexible, but also restricted by a concern for not harming the common good or quality of spaces shared with others. The records also revealed some outdated but remarkable real estate transfer procedures, for example, it was possible to buy and rent a rooftop or a wall section for expansion, which led to the creation of three dimensional property entanglement. This complicated entanglement and clustering of buildings led to a perception of the city as an invisible refuge for Palestinian resistance and as a striated space for the Israeli Army. The army then ‘reinterpreted the space’ and needed to smooth it out by moving through borders and walls¹⁷.

These types of building regulations produced a gigantic mass of aggregate and accumulated architecture composed of six main neighbourhoods; each neighbourhood consisting of several blocks. Blocks of buildings comprise different functions and typologies including houses, factories, baths, mosques, palaces, and shops. Inside each block there are residential clusters of houses (hush). Each cluster includes several houses, and each house comprises one or more dwellings.

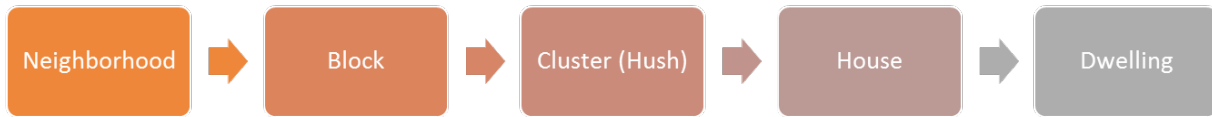


FIGURE 3 the hierarchical arrangement of liveable spaces in the old town.



FIGURE 4 examples of shaded streets, bridge rooms and tunnel-like streets of the old town.

This hierarchical sequence of liveable spaces creates the town depth; man needs to pass through multiple invisible boundaries to reach the final destination. Approaching the residential cluster requires passing through social filters where every resident—including children—can question and decline entry of ‘strangers’¹⁸. The small-scale environs in which individuals are more recognizable create a sense of belonging and reinforces the social relationships between dwellers¹⁹, this is very perceptible once entering the cluster environment.

The main roads resemble the roman grid of the Roman city. They are main spines of pedestrian movement in the casbah; automobile movement is almost absent due to the narrow roads. Residential units are mostly not connected to the main roads but to irregular adjacent alleys. These spines and alleys compose four hierarchal levels of flow: public semi-public roads that are normally straight and regular, in addition to semi-private and private paths that are normally irregular and create a stonework labyrinth. Moreover, unofficial routes are generated informally between buildings, sometimes coinciding with the other four types. These routes – mostly controlled by women – include alleyways, bridge-rooms, rooftops, interior courtyards, windows, backdoors and other architectural elements.

In general, the old building regulations, which were monitored by religious courts, delivered to the 20th century a functioning built environment that is characterised by several physical qualities. Proximity is one dominant feature. By this, I mean the physical nearness of buildings as well as the functional closeness between everyday functional spaces from residential to commercial, industrial, educational, religious and so on. Throughout the city, this nearness takes the form of attachment and connectivity between structures.

Furthermore, invisibility is a primary characteristic of the casbah. Several features like shaded pathways, tunnel-like streets and irregular passageways fosters the invisible movement. Additionally, varying building orientations and heights also disturbs lines of sight and limits the visibility of outdoor spaces.

THE MODERN CITY

However, most of these features started to vanish with the end of Ottoman era. In 1868, the municipality of Nablus was established and started to take control of the urban development of the city. With the beginning of the 20th century, buildings started to expand beyond the historic core, and the municipal government became responsible for issuing building permits and controlling public facilities. The modern city started to flourish during the British Mandate era (1921-1948), especially after an earthquake occurred in 1927. The city then expanded and developed in accordance with modern urban planning legislation and plans provided by British Mandate consultants. Town plans and building laws were prepared and approved on the basis of imported concepts that were designed in response to industrialisation and urbanisation of British cities²⁰. These plans and laws resulted in new shape of the city, characterized by wide streets, setbacks, detached buildings and other features that distinguished it from the old core. Since then, and despite being under Jordanian and Israeli control, the building codes and regulations have not been significantly changed, keeping the urban expansion almost with the same procedure and resulting in fragmented urban densities surrounded and penetrated by wide roads.

Currently, the built up area in Palestine is regulated through master plans that are based on land use patterns and parcelization. According to building regulation, each land use pattern is assigned with specific setbacks, maximum building area, building percentage, building height and other limitations. The implementation of these regulations reduced the horizontal building density while increasing the vertical one, and led to the creation of stand-alone buildings separated by fixed intervals of setbacks that make buildings' boundaries recognizable and all their facades facing the outside environment. Additionally, dwellings became directly connected with public streets leaving no space for social filtration, thus reducing the depth of neighbourhoods to the minimum. These and other features made the modern city less immune to the conditions of combat and curfews, since invisibility of movement, proximity of services and the depth of the social sphere of interaction are missing.

MATRIX OF CONTROL VS MATRIX OF INTERCHANGE.

When the city is subject to long- or short-term invasions, a tight control over the whole city, the casbah, or specific neighbourhood will be enforced. The Israeli Army routinely establishes a 'matrix of control' that normally includes imposing curfew, road closures, turning residential buildings into military posts, and establishing sniping positions over high buildings; this situation may last for several days and maybe weeks. Curfew might be suspended for a few hours a week so inhabitants can supply themselves with provisions.

In order for citizens to survive, they have to adapt counter-tactical operations that I might call the matrix of interchange and sharing. This matrix involves several behavioural patterns of social interchange and sharing by which people provide themselves with necessities essential to their survival. Normally, this interchange includes basic needs like food, water, medicine, space, expertise, or information.

Through intensive fieldwork, I have visited several families living in both the casbah and the modern city of Nablus; my main inquiries were about how people could survive during invasions and curfews. In all of the interviews I conducted, residents agreed on the imminent needs during these times of exception. The needs for food, water, medicine and rescue come first, but the need for electricity, baby clothing and receiving news is also crucial. Additionally, some psychological needs emerge like the feeling of presence of others and the feeling of unity and solidarity.

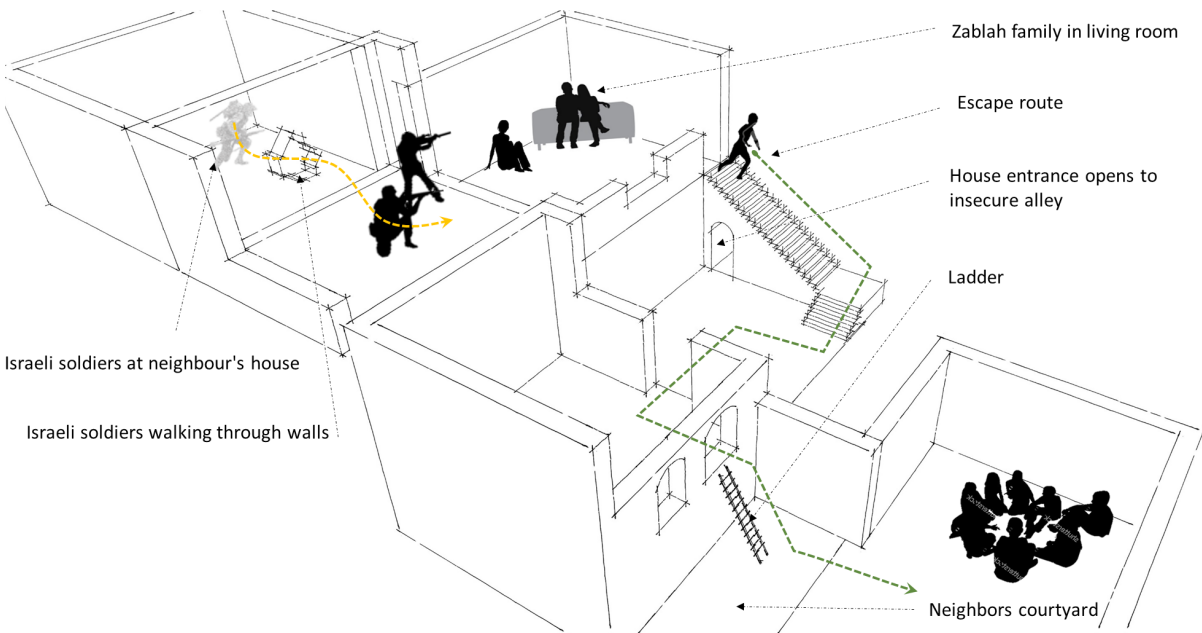


FIGURE 5 Zablah Family escape route.

In spite of being under heavy attack during the brutal invasion of 2002, the residents of the Alyasmeenah neighbourhood in the old town practiced several survival tactics more flexibly than Palestinians living in the adjacent Ras Alein modern neighbourhood. These tactics became common actions considered by residents prior to and during the attack and can be categorized as behavioural patterns; every pattern involves specific practices. These patterns start before the attack by storing goods including food, water, medicine, baby clothes, candles, charged batteries, cigarettes and other items, in addition to making known and preparing the safest room and way-out so they can shelter themselves when fighting breaks out. Then, once being amid combat, there will be other patterns of behaviours. I classify them as sheltering, sharing, delivering, rescuing, fleeing, communicating, refunctioning of spaces and some other behaviours.

Sharing, for example, is a very common pattern. People share their basic needs in addition to sharing space, time and feelings. For example, due to unpredictable length of the attack, people had to minimize their consumption by sharing meals as some families might run out of reserves. Mustafa, a resident of Alyasmeenah, explained that inside their hush²¹, it was possible to have collective cooking and dining. Each family provides what they have. One kitchen was used for cooking, one courtyard was used for eating and recreation, and some rooms were labelled as shelters. The network of covered and hidden routes around their hush facilitated communication and sharing with other clusters as well as providing a secure rescue route and an access to a water source. Despite three adjacent sniping outposts and heavy clashes in the area, the entanglement of architectural masses created in-between spaces that are sheltered from fields of fire.

On the other hand, in the adjacent Ras Alein neighbourhood, interchange between different homes was impossible unless the families live within the same apartment building, where communication is allowed only vertically, by means of the staircase. The stand-alone buildings leave visible in-between spaces that cannot shelter interchange between families. The Al-Usta family ran out of food for almost three days without being able to communicate with anybody because all were unable even to look through their windows. Although a shop is located just 20 meters away, they couldn't reach it and had to put themselves at risk by asking soldiers to provide some food and water.

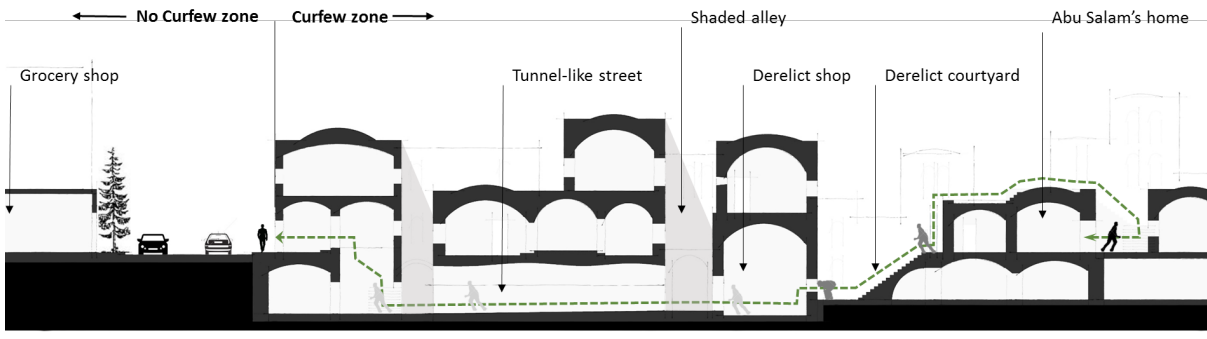


FIGURE 6 Abu Salam route of vegetable delivery.

Sheltering is also a very basic pattern of behaviour; in the old town, the traditional buildings used to orient their openings toward the interior space of the house; the courtyard, thus minimizing exposure to gunshots from the outside environment. This is not the case in most modern neighbourhoods, where all facades and openings are exposed to the outside environment. Additionally, in the old town, the narrowness of the streets obstructs the ability to directly shell the lateral sides of buildings, and so, shells are only expected from above, which indicates that ground floor rooms are much safer. This is exactly what happened with the Abu Rafat family: after the first night of firing, they decided to shelter themselves on the ground floor basement where gunshots and shells cannot reach directly; on the second night, the upper floor received a tank shell that destroyed the second floor room. Fortunately, the family managed to keep safe in the ground floor rooms.

In other cases, families could flee very few minutes before the destruction of their homes. The Zablah family, fearing the heavy firing and bombing around their house, noticed that Israeli soldiers were making a hole in their wall, leaving them no choice but to flee and leave their house. With many gunmen in the alleyways, and soldiers in surrounding rooms and on rooftops, they called on their neighbours to lean a ladder against their wall under the window so they could escape through the neighbours' courtyard. A few minutes later, Israeli soldiers entered their house through the hole and heavy firing occurred inside.

Delivering basic needs is another important pattern. The proximity of buildings and invisibility of in-between spaces in addition to the entanglement of dwellings facilitate exchange and delivery of items and even people from house to house. House-to-house transfer is eased through rooftops, backdoors, common courtyards, windows, and sometimes hidden passages. In Alyasmeenah, people could open and transfer goods from grocery shops, bakeries, pharmacies and restaurants that are available and easy to reach; the accessibility to these needs was relatively safe and within walking distance. Abu Salam has described how he could obtain some vegetables for his family and neighbours by moving from his hush to the outskirts of the old town. During this journey, he used his house's rooftop to reach derelict in-between space, and then entered a derelict house from which he arrived an empty shop through a small window. Then he had to cross a narrow alley before being covered in a tunnel-like street from which he reached a building that opens to the modern town streets where curfew was not imposed, and then he reached a store where large quantities of vegetables were still available.

Once basic needs are available inside the cluster, it can easily be delivered between dwellings and even between other clusters. Om Alaa, a resident of Alyasmeenah, was able to acquire provisions from her neighbours through her terrace that opens onto a neighbour's courtyard, and then she was able to deliver food for her upstairs neighbours through a basket hanging by a rope. Her neighbours were stuck inside one room of their house while Israeli soldiers were occupying the rest of the house. They were lucky to be put in that room that had a window opening to Om Alaa's house.

When access to basic services such as hospitals and schools is denied -either by force or by fear- people start to informally substitute these facilities by refunctioning available spaces. In 2002-2003, Nablus endured a very long curfew lasting for more than three months. As most schools are located outside the old city, citizens found no solution but to establish popular schools inside the old town. Having many educated residents and teachers, available empty spaces, and possibilities of secured routes, people started to invite students to attend informal public schools. Two family diwans²² began functioning as public schools, safe and easy routes of access were introduced to students, and a matrix of news interchange kept students, teachers and families updated with instructions of movement on a daily basis. During several invasions, many spaces were appropriated and refunctioned, the Alkhayat family's diwan was fashioned into a small field clinic, an old derelict stable was prepared and made into a shelter; Al Baik mosque became a field hospital, and a portion of a palace garden was used as a temporary graveyard. These appropriations were not as flexible in the modern city as it was in the old town; even with the availability of empty and suitable places, accessibility was almost impossible.

CONCLUSION

The survival patterns of behaviour examined above, as well as many aspects of everyday life of urban population during conflict times, are considerably overlooked by modern and contemporary urban planning academia and practice. The history of urban planning in Palestine was initiated by a colonial power, which neglected the social and cultural specificities of the local context; its aim was to enforce military control over Palestinian urban centres. Now, seventy years later, the heritage of this colonial urban planning system is still the main guideline for Palestinian urban development.

It is not feasible to claim that old towns were prepared to be more defensive against political powers, but it can be claimed that residents of old towns gain more security, controllability and empowerment against assailants. The operation anchor in Jaffa in 1936 is a concrete example of 'military operations as urban planning' that was targeting smoothening the space for military control over the local population.

The idea that old towns provide more protection for its residents is not at all a new discovery; this article is not trying to reinvent the wheel but it tries to uncover how this idea works. The analytical comparison between old and modern tissues provides a better understanding of the relationship between the urban form and culture, on one hand, and resilience on the other. With the physical features of proximity, invisibility, internal permeability and depth of the town, which are mainly derived from social and cultural values, people have more controllability over their everyday space and hence more coping capacity.

The study of the accumulation of these experiences not only reveals the inventiveness that extreme conditions catalyse, but highlights the fundamental impact of spatial conditions on possible survival strategies. Isn't survival the zero degree of resilience? In that sense, these accumulated experiences are an essential resource for any further physical and social planning of the city.

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Endnotes

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- 2 Clár Ní Chonghaile, Urban warfare has altered the nature of humanitarian work (*The Guardian*, 2015). Accessed Dec 30, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com>
- 3 Tarik Kafala, The high cost of urban warfare, 2003. Accessed Dec 30, 2015. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2882295.stm.
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- 12 Katherine Purvis, *Delivering aid: agencies struggle with increasing needs, costs and insecurity* (*The Guardian*. 2015). Accessed 31 Dec 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com>
- 13 Intifada is the term describing the Palestinian revolution against Israeli occupation.
- 14 Nurhan Abujidi and Han Verschure, *Military Occupation as Urbicide* (*The Arab World Geographer*, 2006)
- 15 Ibid
- 16 Thaera Bleibleh, *Architectural Reading of the Ottoman's Sijills of the LI-Shar'ayah Court in Nablus City between 1655-1807* (unpublished master thesis, 2010)
- 17 Eyal Weizman, *Walking Through Walls* (*eipcp*, 2007) Accessed 2016. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0507/weizman/en>.
- 18 Stranger here include anyone who is not a resident of the cluster.
- 19 Loeckx, André. 1998. "Kabyliya, the House, and the Road: Games of Reversal and Displacement." *Journal of Architectural Education* 52 (2): 87-99.
- 20 Rasem Khamaisi, *Structural Plans as a Mean of Local Development for Palestinian Government* (*Al-Syasa Al-Filistiniyah* 1994) No. I and II, pp.65-91 (in Arabic).
- 21 Cluster of dwellings.
- 22 The diwan is a family gathering space (building) that hosts family events.

Image Sources

- Figure 1: The author.
- Figure 2: georeferenced map of Palestinian Ministry of Local Governance. 2015.
- Figure 3: The author.
- Figure 4: The author.
- Figure 5: The author.
- Figure 6: The author.