

Hagit Keysar |

Traces of Life: The Imaginary Property and the Stored Home'



It appears that something is happening beyond the right edge of the photograph. A woman stands in the center, surrounded by nine men. Six of them, most likely contract workers, wearing identical orange vests, stand there idly looking at the occurrence, their hands in their pockets, waiting for something. A man wearing police uniform moves away from the happening; another man in "civilian" clothing looks toward that same happening beyond the borders of the photograph. The woman crosses the center of the circle created by these men; she is meticulously dressed, only her face and hands are seen beyond the black and shadeless clothes. Her left hand shapes a fist holding the dress to prevent her from stumbling as she walks; her right hand brings her scarf close to her mouth in a motion expressing restraint, or rather, aversion. Her eyes look down, as if she does not want to be seen, or does not want to see. She walks away from the event, but her body and face turn towards it, as if remembering that she has left something behind.

This photograph was taken during the demolition of a house in A-Tur, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem. The occurrence takes place beyond the frame – the house, the bulldozers, the crowd of neighbors and journalists, the police and army cars blockading the house – all these were left out. The photograph seems to represent an arbitrary detail of the larger picture. The photographer chose to focus

on the woman who lived in that house with her husband and children up to that day. He examined her movements, fixing this image of a woman in the midst of a militarized space, gendered and controlled, in war and conflict zones. In warfare, bombings, shootings, missiles, and other means of combat harm women and men alike. Still, in order to understand the full implications on daily life, the concept of war needs to be broadened beyond the historic definition referring to the time of the armed conflict and the ceasefire.² In this sense, war includes changes and damages to human life that take place during the time of fighting and following it; refugee camps, poverty, pollution, restrictions on movement, the lack of housing, water, and electricity, and the military presence throughout all aspects of daily life.

The scene in the photograph bears witness to the power relations: the woman is not a citizen with equal rights and stature, but a resident whose citizenship status is incomplete, and the people around her represent the governance at its different levels of execution. The men in the orange vests bring to mind rescue teams in photographs taken in disaster stricken places, the bright color of their vests can be easily identified as they walk into the danger in order to save injured people. In this particular situation, the woman is not injured, and the men in the vests are not there in order to save her or care for her. These are contract workers,

Israeli or foreign, who were assigned to empty the house of her personal belongings. Two of them, their backs to the photographer, seem to watch her as she silently slips away from the unsecured area.

This is the moment where humanitarian organizations step into the picture ensuring that those evacuated have a minimal roof over their heads. Human rights organizations and activists arrive at the scene. They photograph and document the site and protest against the government's actions. This is the last chapter in the current round between the authorities and the homeowners; the family is evacuated, the house is in ruins and the criminal file for illegal building will be closed. The demolition of the house is the brutal spectacle of law enforcement, its last chapter and the only one to be photographed and publicly discussed. Thus it finds its way to reach the public's awareness, to enter people's body of memory of the battle over the local geography. That which is not as clearly photogenic as the act of demolition is the prolonged displacement, which does not begin with the demolition nor does it end with it, but is rooted in everyday life dictated by the surveillance of the house, as it expropriates the space of privacy.

Stored House

We walk down the stairs following Manal, who guides us to the ground floor in the building

where she resides, towards a large door leading to a garage. She does not have the key and we peep through a crack by the door. In the faint light we can single out building materials, as well as wood and aluminum doorposts and doors leaning on the wall, kitchen cabinets, sinks, and a bath. Back in her apartment Manal served us black coffee, making sure that each of us receives a bit of the foam that gathered atop the steaming coffee in the pot. She said she wanted to show me something and brought an unframed photograph, torn in the edges, with a colorful moldy stain covering a part of the image. It is the portrait of a woman, her hair wrapped in a bun, her face carefully made up and a gentle smile on her face.

Intissar holds a municipal property tax bill that she folds, rolls, and folds time and again while she talks about the house she had to leave. On January 28, 1998, she will have to arrive at the court with a photograph of her demolished house as proof that the court order had been tended to. We met eleven days before the last date to arrive at the court, and the house was already a heap of rocks and iron. We saw children play between the ruins and two men looking for building materials that could be reused. Intissar places a pile of green papers as thick as a book in front of me, dozens of municipal fine payments, each for 1000NIS, the first dating from 2006 and the last up to 2013. The documents piled in her house reveal the

weight of bureaucracy and recount some of the conditions that led her to proceed and demolish her house single-handedly.

Salma recounts daily life as a constant state of alert, *khalat taahuv* she says in Arabic. She uses a military term, alluding to the house as a war zone. With her husband she built the house without a permit, and the Jerusalem Municipality began to take legal and administrative measures against them. In East Jerusalem, as in all parts of the West Bank, there is no postal service, and so municipal inspectors and Israeli Military Police paste warrants onto the external house walls. They can place warrants under rocks in the entrance, or personally deliver them; sometimes, Salma recounts, they give it to the children playing outside the house. *It never leaves my mind. I open my eyes every day and thank god that they have not come yet.* She feels that a warrant could appear on the walls of the house at any given moment, that every civilian car parking in the area may be a government administrator who has come to notify them of a demolition, evacuation, or a fine.

In cases of houses built without a permit, aside from the expenses accompanying the construction of the house, there are huge fines for building without a permit and payments for the process of requesting a legal building permit, all of which can add up to hundreds of thousands of shekels. Upon receiving the

warrant and fine the owners also risk arrest, in case they do not pay or evacuate the house within a given time. The heavy debts become a shadow hovering above the inhabitants' everyday life. Intissar did not leave her immediate surroundings for many months, in fear of being arrested by policemen or soldiers for due payments assigned on her name, owed for building without permit. Following the demolition, the house where Intissar lives at the moment allows her to protect herself and escape arrest, but at the same time she becomes a prisoner inside the house. In June 2007 cops and Military Police soldiers took Intissar away to a detention center in Jerusalem. She was not permitted to have a family member accompany her in the car, which was full of men; she was held up for a day and only released once a family member paid 5000NIS as bail for her. That same week Intissar recounts that *the military came and photographed the house from all its sides*.

Salma recounts the authorities' activities through her personal experience, still, she knows of their abilities from her relatives and neighbors as well. The arbitrary nature of the manner and time of communications with the authorities strengthen the feeling that she has no grounding or safe position in her own house, filling her daily life with fear and uncertainty. The house constitutes a refuge and private space, notwithstanding the fact that it is singled

out by the authorities. The effort to fulfill the authorities' demands marks the domestic space with fear and tension. It destabilizes the private sphere as well as the refuge within the physical structure, by the constant potential of losing the house. Three months after construction of their house was completed, Manal and her family were forced to evacuate it since it stood on the path of the Separation Wall. A year following their departure the Separation Wall has yet to be built and the house still stands. Trash is piled around it and the area serves as a children's playground. Manal can see the house from the window of her rented apartment; that is where she left her struggle against the authorities, along with all her savings and her family's future plans. The house has been expropriated and all she was left with were the payments. What little could be saved from the house Manal's family is storing in the ground floor's garage, in hope to find future use for it.

The terrifying idea that one would "choose" to demolish one's own house became a reality when Intissar and her husband decided to spare themselves the additional payment for the demolition, along with the anticipation, the pain, and the humiliation tied with it, and demolished their house by themselves. Intissar explains that they wanted to avoid the invasion of their privacy and the anticipated pain, particularly to the young daughters. *It's easier for me to demolish with my own hands rather*

than have them take out the furniture. I'd rather die than allow them to take the furniture out of my house. Furniture is very important. Every daughter has her clothes, her undergarments, the private things. When they come, they make you leave the house, and then they start taking everything outside. The house protects their privacy in the most profound way. The private here is not simply that which is not public, and from the words of Intissar it seems that privacy is not necessarily dependent on the physical structure, but rather, on the possibility to choose the border that protects her privacy. For Intissar, demolishing the house is an action through which she defines her privacy, rather than loses it.

Imagined Property

Clothes left carelessly on the edge of the bed in a photograph of a couple's bedroom imply that the room hadn't been prepared for the guests, who arrived without a warning. There is nothing spectacular about this photograph, it is simply the photo of a bedroom, but it bothers me nevertheless. I try to imagine that a person I don't know will photograph my private bedroom without my explicit permission. It seems impossible. And even were it possible, what would the photographer's motivation be? To expose my private life to others? To harm me, to frighten me? And let's say I quietly agreed to let it happen, under what

circumstances would I have forgone my right to refuse? Perhaps in a place where I was not free to refuse and to determine the limits that define my privacy, for example, in a situation in which the place where I sleep does not belong only to me.

I found the photograph of the bedroom in a criminal file concerning houses built without a permit in the archive of the judicial division of the Jerusalem municipality. In response to my request, the municipality gave me permission to copy photographs from files documenting inspections of houses built without a permit. By doing so, the municipality shared with me its copyright on the images, and deposited with me its imaginary property – the photographed house. What is interesting about the photographs is not only that they expose the invasive practices involved in the process of enforcing the planning law – abuse of authority and power is neither new nor surprising. It is an opportunity to observe how the mechanism operates and examine the presuppositions related to its visual practices, to wander through these images and trace back the biographical details of their institutional life. Production, collection, duplication and dissemination of the photographs, their movements from hand to hand and from place to place are activities that leave their traces on the surface of the image, an amalgam of evidences for the production of space. The monumental documentation in the

archive, which classifies and reorganizes the traces of the institutional mechanisms, is the raw material of memory which allows us to (re) produce relationships on the ground, between people, and between people and place. It is the infrastructure of remembrance, forgetfulness and contemporary amnesia, improvised and organized.

Hundreds of charges are placed yearly against individuals for illegal construction in East Jerusalem. A person who builds without a permit becomes a criminal,³ and in this case the file, which usually includes a photograph of the criminal, contains the image of a house. The enforcement procedures of the planning and building law in the specific locality of Jerusalem and towards the Palestinian population is one of the principal tools to track and control the house and those living in it. Alongside the Separation Wall, crossing through Jerusalem and threatening to disconnect many houses from the city, their natural surrounding and source of income.⁴ The built and the planned path of the wall erases many Palestinian homes that stand in its way, and allows for identification of the residential space, along with its residents, as potential threats to the security of the State of Israel.⁵

During the 1990s, photography became an increasingly central component of the enforcement process, providing evidence of violations and a documentation of the

enforcement procedure itself. Along with copies of court orders, warnings and protocols of court hearings, the files also includes photographs, that allow the observer to imagine incontrovertible facts of a crime committed, helping to create a regime of incontestable truth. Supervisors from the Building Inspection Department, divided two per region, follow the construction, and photograph the house in different resolutions throughout the duration of its construction and use. The supervisors compile the photographs of the house and its residents within the file in the archive and deliver the image they create in their words and from their own experience to those in charge of different aspects of the administrative and judicial process.

The enormous number of snapshots taken by the supervisors during the course of their work is kept in the archive's files. The supervisors document the building, the inside of the house, take photos of themselves in the place, and document the transitory moments of contact with its inhabitants. The sheer quantity of photographs accumulated and the interpretative possibilities they offer raise obstacles in the institutional attempt to classify the information they contain according to a certain category or a particular truth. These visual practices not only make the bureaucracy more invasive, but also make it more penetrable than ever before, to outside documentation and scrutiny.

There is the keeping track of construction being held on the ground and there is also keeping track of keeping track. The house is copied and inserted in the archive and then copied again and again for the various purposes of those who use it. Instructions are written on the file by hand, advancing the mechanism of reproduction: Please copy; Please photocopy; To be scanned. The copy is marked, folded, passed from one hand to another, it undergoes wear and tear, returns to the file and is sometimes copied again, even if it no longer has much resemblance to the original document, it is filed and kept on file. In the snapshots they take, the inspectors copy the house into the file, they take photos of the bedroom, children's room, kitchen, toilet, bathroom, living-room, all appear in the file and become imaginary property of the ones authorized to use it. Later I realized that since I copied the images from the files, these private spaces became also part of my personal memory.

The private house in the archive is the imaginary property of the apparatus that acts upon it. The image of the building is wrung out, worn from use and erased over the years, leaving traces of each and every act of the apparatus and their reduplication over the image and consecutively over the house and its inhabitants. Fulfilling the authorities' demands becomes an integral part of the daily routine of residents subjected to building inspections and enforcement. The

supervisors show up at the house at certain times to check whether the court decision has been implemented, or to deliver warnings and injunctions. Yet between inspection visits, the presence of the authorities remains, embodied in efforts to keep up with the huge payments and the needed expenses for living. Fines amounting to hundreds of thousands of shekels are divided into obligatory monthly payments. Non-payment can result in arrest and additional fines that are added to charges imposed on arrears. The financial burden becomes part of the daily routine undermining the stability of the home and of its inhabitants, who are bound in a life of debt. Efforts to keep up with the payments also represent acceptance and obedience that can hold a promise or an anchor for the physical structure of the house, the conditions for whose stability are in the hands of the authorities.

I arrived at the department with the photocopies I collected from the files in the archive, and the conversations with the supervisors took place while looking at the photographs together. The photograph of the bedroom was signed by P., one of the inspectors I met. When I asked what he looked for in that room he replied *traces of life*. He looked at the photograph again and said that in the bedroom they usually look for the bomb shelter,⁶ because in the building plans the potential shelter is always listed as one of the bedrooms. He

explained to me that aside from the surveillance of houses built without a permit, they also observe families who received building permits. In these cases they verify that no one inhabits the house before it is granted with a certificate authorizing its completion. In these visits they document *traces of life* in the house. *What does it mean, traces of life?*

The politics of inspection and control over building in Jerusalem are hidden in the administrative space of the municipality, but are omnipresent, like a thin, transparent membrane that can tear and adhere to someone who makes the wrong move. I was a fly-on-the-wall in the archive and was encouraged to feel comfortable and at home. The employees were friendly; they made me coffee, reminded me to eat lunch, and even offered to arrange a student job for me. Only one of the 40 files on the table before me concerned a building owned by Jews, a place used as a Talmud Torah school for orthodox Jewish children. Documents regarding the classroom, on Winograd Street in Neve Ya'akov, in East Jerusalem, were placed in a file with a blue cover, a color signifying "West Jerusalem." Apparently the person who used the blue folder wanted to save himself the trouble of copying the information about the building and its owner, and simply cut out and pasted on it part of the cover of the previous file, which was pink, indicating a building violation in the western part of the city. What do the colors of

the files signify? One of the archive's employees said they are divided into buildings belonging to Arabs and buildings belonging to Jews. Later another archive worker told me that the division refers to West and East Jerusalem. The category "west" does not necessarily refer to an actual geographical reality, but hints at the reorganization of space that will be consistent with, or allow the existence of, a categorical ethnic separation between Jews and Arabs. The political struggle over the local geography is fragmented into the acts of classification and categorization, which, on the one hand, marks the geographical space of illegality and on the other, a space of legality within the archive.

I felt strange and uncomfortable when I sat down in the guest room that I recognised without ever having visited it. A young man opened the door for us. I recalled the look in his eyes immediately. I also recalled the face of his little sister who had peeped round the door to see who arrived. She had really grown, I thought to myself. We weren't invited into the house; he sat us down in the guest room adjoining the entrance, a small room that was more ornate than it appeared in the photo, with golden lampshades and an adorned ceiling. The photograph of the bedroom was one in a series of photographs I found in the file. It included photographs of two children and an adult in the house, exteriors of the house, as well as documentation of all the rooms: the kitchen,

the nurseries, the living room, the toilettes, and the roof. I located the family whose house it was in order to request their permission to use the images. We sat in the living room for a while; the father wasn't home and someone went to get him. I placed the photographs on the table and took out the one showing the man we were waiting for. In the photo he was seated on the same couch on which we sat, holding his little daughter on his knees. When I showed the photo to P. he told me that it was taken during questioning. He needed a flat surface to fill in the investigation form so he sat at the table, which isn't visible in the photo; the man in the photo is looking at him. His partner took the picture while he was questioning and recording the answers.

I looked at the table to my right; there was a plasma screen on it with the Microsoft Windows screen saver flowing across it. The young man who had opened the door sat on the opposite couch, all of us sat quietly. I didn't know whether to show him the photo of the child with the sharp look in his eyes, holding his little sister. I was afraid he wouldn't understand how the photo came into my possession, and why. The little sister stood in the doorway and looked at her brother.

A few minutes later the father arrived and sat to our left on the couch. He works in a nearby pharmacy and arrived well dressed, in a suit, playing with the Misbaha (prayer beads)

between his fingers. His wife followed him; she was not wearing a burqa, her head was uncovered and she had short grey hair. Shortly afterwards a few of her female relatives who lived nearby also walked in; suddenly the room was full of people. They looked at the photos of their house repeatedly, passing them between one another.

We didn't stay long. The father told us that there were no problems with the house: it was built a long time ago with a permit. The problem, he says, is with the lower floor, the shop, whose ceiling is a little higher than permitted. He received the building permit in 1999, but in 2003 the regulation changed and the permit was cancelled. Since then he's been paying monthly fines that have become tens of thousands of shekels, in addition to over 12,000 shekels in fees for a lawyer and an engineer.

He doesn't understand when the inspectors photographed the house, and *why? There's no problem with the house, only with the floor below.* How did they enter the rooms, and what were they looking for? The father remembers the day he sat for questioning in his living room. He said the inspectors don't show up frequently, he could tell by the daughter's clothes that the photos were taken during two different visits.

They don't let us live, he says. Today I can only give my children what's necessary, I can't promise them more than that. He speaks in

Arabic; I don't understand most of it and A. translates. I can see what she cannot translate: he raises his hand and clutches his throat, *kanaquna*, (خنقونا) they're choking us, he said once, and clutched his throat three or four more times during the conversation. I felt as if I were unwillingly duplicating the strangling grip that chokes him and his house with the ongoing reduplication of the image.

The father was willing for the photographs of him and his house to be exhibited, and after a brief conversation with the lawyer allowed me to use them. Although we hadn't discussed it, it was clear that even though he did not hold the copyright, the rights to the images taken inside his home, without his knowledge or agreement, belonged to him, and him alone. *Should I leave the photos here?* I asked A., *Better not*, she said without hesitation, and I returned them all to my bag.

Warnings are delivered by the supervisors and the forces that accompany them to whoever is present on the construction site or the home. The Warning is phrased and printed in Hebrew, the official text is sometimes translated into Arabic ad hoc and handwritten next to the Hebrew text, the original is left with the recipient and a copy remains in the file. In the warning the builder is ordered to stop all building activities and return the site to its previous state, in case the order is not fulfilled *you will be prosecuted in court*, as it is written in

the warning. It is a detail, a trace of a working mechanism of deterrence that operates in the particular geographical area of Jerusalem. It is a fragment in an array of notifications and intimidations, which include the surveillance of the house, the demolition of houses, and military presence that constantly expropriates the public and private space, turning life into a constant state of alert. The simple privilege of being protected from constant exposure, scrutiny and surveillance is a basic condition for developing an empowered position from which one can resist such measures that expropriate one's rights, and particularly the right to privacy.

In light of this, the demolition of houses seems like a special spectacle arranged by the regime in order to disguise and distract attention from the ongoing rehearsal of power from within the intimacy of the archive. The administrative use of photography enables the dissemination of evidence for a brutal policy that holds the physical and conceptual home under a constant reality of danger, in close proximity to disaster, and everlasting distance from a future.

The surveillance of thousands of houses throughout years of legal processes slowly and surely destabilizes an entire society, resulting in a war of attrition that utilizes people, paperwork, and time as its weapons. What links the photograph and the actual events? The photographs kept in the archive allow the creation of visibility and presence of a

geographic/ethnic space as a site of violation, of illegality, mapping it as a crime scene.

Ha-makom – Hebrew for 'the place,' appears in every file. It is reiterated, written by hand over the photographs with red, blue or black marker pens to mark the location of the house. The meaning of 'place' is the indication of something, of a particular area of space, of some sort of existence. Things and people can be recognized and identified by their place, the place can be identified by them. It means local, particular, specific. The photograph is marked with this indication, which guides the viewer and directs one's attention to a particular point in the picture, distinguishing it from others similar to it. Yet, rather than indicating a particular place – a house owned by a certain family – it is a uniform sign awarded to all houses in all files, by all the agents who handle these files and intervene in them. The place is each of the individual houses and, at the same time, all of them together - an offence, a crime scene, and the crime itself.

What is seen in the photograph – the house in the photograph as well as the photograph itself – is *The Place*, it can be felt and controlled from a distance. The place reproduces a defined space for an internal discourse and a shared memory that allows the supervisors and other viewers to develop a close relationship by getting to know the photographed house and its inhabitants. This relationship deepens with

time through the ongoing use and reduplication of the image. The image of the house that is stored in the municipality's judicial archive is a copy of the house on the ground: it allows the silent exchange between the source and its duplication, between belonging and territory, and between the copyright of the photograph and the ownership rights to the house.

Notes

- 1 This essay includes interviews from research I have conducted at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 2007, directed by Dr. Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian and Tamar Berenblum, along with visual research and an exhibition December 2009, in which I focus on photographs and the use of photography in the enforcement process of the Planning and Building Law in Jerusalem. I would like to thank the women I met in East Jerusalem, who are cited under aliases here, and who kindly agreed to share their time and thoughts with us. In addition, I would like to thank Nadia Harhash, Nimar Shaaban, and Manal Shaaban who joined me in these meetings and assisted in the conversations that took place in Arabic, as well as Fadi Youssef and Shada Zuabi for their translations from Arabic to Hebrew. My gratitude goes also to Hibat Marom and Meir Margalit of the "Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions," to Norma Musih, Yair Adiel and Elad Orian for thinking with me, and to Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian and Tamar Berenblum.
- 2 Hynes, H.P., 2004. On the battlefield of women's bodies: An overview of the harm of war to women. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27(5-6), p.431-445.
- 3 Building without a permit is considered an offense, and in most cases the court does not tend to questions of personal, social, or economic circumstances. Neta Amar, Esq., in Nati Marom's "Planning Catch 2", (Hebrew) published in Bimkom: Planners for Rights of Planning, Jerusalem, 2004.
- 4 B'Tselem's website, in reference to planning policies in East

Jerusalem. In Bimkom Association's "Notes to the Local Master Plan-for Jerusalem, 2000." Bimkom: Planners for Rights of Planning, May 2006. Meir Margalit, "No Place Like Home" Published by the Israeli Committee Against the Demolition of Homes, 2007.

5 Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian, "When Laws are Tools for Oppression" (Hebrew) Iyunei Mishpat, 2006

6 The Israeli Law stipulates that all houses are built with inner bomb shelter (מב"ד)