

## Abe Hayeem

Abe Hayeem is a London-based architect and chair of Architects and Planners for Justice in Palestine (extended bio below interview).

The following is a written exchange which took place in March and April 2012.

Abe Hayeem (AH)

Dena Qaddumi & Ahmad Barclay (DQ & AB)

**DQ & AB:** In what context was Architects and Planners for Justice in Palestine (APJP) established? What were its objectives and have these evolved over time? How does its work parallel and/or differ from Architects Against Apartheid (AAP)?

**AH:** APJP, which I helped found and now chair, was set up as an independent international pressure group, supportive of the Palestine solidarity movement, to challenge the ethics and practice of design professionals in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. These Israeli professionals play a key part in consolidating the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, in planning and building the illegal settlements, and were also instrumental in creating the built reality of the Israeli state in Palestine during the Mandate and after the 1947 partition, on the 93 percent of land (within Israel) that was sequestered from Palestinians, and on more than 500 destroyed villages and towns.

*Homa Umigdal (Wall and Tower), early Zionist settlement typology (Wikimedia Commons).*



Since 1947, Israeli kibbutzim, towns and cities have been built over the ruins of Palestinian villages, houses and heritage that were wiped from the map by a form of architectural erasure. Israeli architects and planners, knowingly or not, have become a key participant

of this situation. Israeli settlements built after the 1967 War, considered illegal under international law, could not have been realized without their help. Professional ethics, long enshrined in architectural and planning codes, demand that we confront these unwelcome truths and do not remain silent or complicit. It is with this in mind that we are supporting campaigns by internal Palestinian and Israeli NGOs that challenge this unprofessional conduct.

Since the dispossession of Palestinians is proceeding at a frenzied pace, and Israel's laws and brutality of occupation involve mass displacement, removal and transfer of the indigenous population using the whole [matrix of control](#) (the Wall, the checkpoints, the closures), the prime aim of APJP is to try and campaign for a halt to these activities, since there will be little left of the OPTs to form a Palestinian state.

As part of international civil society, which finds that governments (mainly the US, UK and EU) are reluctant to take a stand or sanction Israel to end its decades-long infringements of international law and human rights, and in response to the call from Palestinian civil society, APJP needs to participate in the BDS movement, targeting the areas and institutions that are implicated in design, construction and architecture. These include the illegal Separation Wall, the illegal settlements, the firms, building materials and construction plant involved in the settlements, ethnic cleansing, and plundering of water resources.

The work of APJP does parallel UK Architects Against Apartheid (UKAAA) – which I was instrumental in setting up – which was involved with the boycott of construction firms and businesses involved in Apartheid South Africa. The one action that had the most impact was to get the RIBA to end its links and recognition of schools of architecture in South Africa, which until that time had close associations with the RIBA. This was done on the basis of the almost negligible number of black students attending these schools. Though forcefully opposed by supporters of the regime, the schools did alter their intake and said later that the boycott had a salutary effect on them.



*An Article 25 design workshop in Sierra Leone (Article 25)*

UKAAA highlighted the inferior planning and building provided for the black majority – the forced removals of blacks from inner cities to townships in the Bantustans, and the demolitions of whole areas like District Six in Cape Town. In comparison, the intricate synergy between architecture and planning with government and military policy of transfer and removal of Palestinians from the West Bank, and the apartheid policies in housing, roads, water and land ownership, are much more pronounced in Israel. Real estate development – that privileges one section of the population over another – is the motor that drives the architecture and planning system in Israel, and consolidates the occupation.

Since the IAUA (Israel Association of United Architects) has disassociated itself from its members' actions, and its architects seem to be detached from the social and political implications of their architectural work, it merits suspension from the UIA until it adheres to such ethics, until projects based on land theft on a massive scale from the indigenous Palestinians and human rights breaches come to an end, together with the occupation, and until justice is restored. This will provide a clear signal from an international professional body that it is making an ethical stand to safeguard the dignity and importance of our role in civic society, which will provide some hope of change, at a moment of great urgency.

**DQ & AB:** Has architectural education failed to instill a solid foundation of ethics in the profession? Has the assertion of professional ethics been misrepresented as subjectivity? Would you see the rise of 'humanitarian practice', and architect-led organizations such as Article 25 and Architecture for Humanity as offering a route toward a more 'activist' role for the profession?

**AH:** I think that architectural education has had to respond to the increasingly complex technical and regulatory fields of architecture and awareness of the need for sustainability, inclusiveness and access to buildings and responding to diverse urban communities, that the issues of ethics in the form of human rights may not be directly considered in architectural education. Certainly in post-graduate education, dissertation and doctorates on human rights and political situations and natural disasters do form a growing part of the subject matter, especially when groups of students are taken out to the field, to take part in actual projects with the local communities.

The consideration of ethics in the architects' Code of Conduct is essentially concerned with the duty of architects to their client, and the practice of architecture. The consideration of its impact on society can be emphasized depending on the context in which it is practiced, and obviously can take on a greater or lesser subjectivity and interpretation, depending on the approach by the practitioner. It is the main architects' membership bodies and their representatives that can decide on how far to go regarding ethics, especially when it concerns encouraging practice in countries with dubious human rights but where the potential for grand lucrative schemes is very high. Who is going to stop the big firms from huge scale projects in China, the Gulf States, and all the 'Stans' in Russia?

But there is a growing body of architects who now have formed organizations that deal with the real problems of the developing world and those areas hit by natural disasters, or deep poverty, social upheaval and oppression. This includes, Article 25, and Architecture for Humanity, which are supported by wealthy practices, or by groups of socially minded architects like ARC-Peace, who have given up commercial practice to devote themselves to working for underprivileged communities. The inclusion and connection of these bodies into mainstream architectural education would provide a more interesting and satisfying alternative to commercial practice.

I know for instance that ARC-Peace in its forthcoming annual conference will have one of its key sessions on architectural education. It is quite easy to introduce humanitarian projects that deal with underprivileged communities into the curriculum in many universities and schools of architecture.

**DQ & AB:** We have noted a broader engagement from architects and planners, both inside and outside the academy, in analyzing the spatial tools of the occupation. Do you feel this is the case, and have these exercises generated broader action and awareness around Israel-Palestine?

There are encouragingly, growing and diverse groups tackling not only the spatial, but physical and social tools of the occupation, and providing forward looking solutions to deconstructing it and then 'recolonising' the spaces post-occupation. Your work in [arenaofspeculation.org](http://arenaofspeculation.org), and #3awda, and also DAAR and the Palestine Regeneration Forum are being very innovative in both speculative and actual projects on both sides of the Green Line.

*"Ungrounding" Psagot settlement - Disrupting the urbanism of the first 15 centimeters (DAAR)*



**AH:** This is actually a vital contribution to resistance and subversion against the occupation, and can also provide a hope that the occupation can be overcome and that it is not the last word in Israeli hegemony. As such, it can focus peoples' attention on the

damage that the occupation does to human lives, and that there are solutions to what might seem an intractable situation. So long as these exercises are not done simply for academic reasons, they can create a real impact, especially where the oppressed communities can take part in these exercises and contribute to the solutions. APJP is working in co-ordination with these NGOs and individuals, to encourage and publicize their work as a positive contribution to the opposing the occupation. This work extends to what is happening within Israel, where the dispossession started in 1948 continues today, especially for the Bedouin in the Negev and Galilee, and in the mixed cities like Jaffa, Acre and Ramle. Groups like Zochrot, Ir-Amim, Adalah, ICAHD and BIMKOM come to mind in dealing with these aspects and challenging the system and Israeli society from within.

**DQ & AB:** There has been open support for APJP from high profile members of the UK architectural profession, including more than one former president of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects). Yet, the establishment itself has apparently been unwilling to endorse the activities of APJP. Could you comment on the obstacles faced in this regard?

**AH:** With UKAAA, we had support from high profile architects, many big names on the RIBA Council who carried the day when it came to passing effective resolutions on South Africa. These included Richard Rogers, Sir Hugh Casson, Cedric Price, Ted Cullinan, Peter Ahrends, Neave Brown and more. APJP has the support of many of the same well known figures now including the world famous historian and critic Charles Jencks, and Sunand Prasad, and in fact have had signatories on important petitions of a greater number of international names, including six past-presidents of the RIBA. They have also been supportive on the international events like the Venice Biennale. They in fact do endorse the activities of APJP, but where it comes to delivering on strong action at Council level, powerful political forces, and the reluctance to appear 'political' make it more difficult to deliver the goods.

There is the resistance provided by the US, UK and some European countries – particularly Germany – to any action taken against Israel. That comes into play, and also a strong pro-Israel lobby, with many of them clients of big practices, so it would take a great deal of courage to make something happen. Architects, too, as a body can be very resistant to any organizational action that may affect their work potential. But we are working on this, and I am not totally pessimistic about the outcome. Truth and integrity will win the day.

**DQ & AB:** Could you also comment on your efforts within the Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA) to censure the Israeli architectural establishment for its complicity in the West Bank settlement enterprise? What was the response from international architectural organisations outside of the UK?

**AH:** Over the years, we have been calling for action to be taken against the architectural associations and bodies in Israel, whose members are involved in the whole occupation and dispossession enterprise, and to get the International Union of Architects to act in accordance with its code of ethics and resolutions of which Israel is in continuous defiance. Our own professional Architects' associations seem reluctant to take up issues of ethics that they feel are "political". Even though South Africa was expelled from the UIA in the 80s because of apartheid, they seem reluctant now to act against member countries. The argument always used is "why single out Israel" when there are so many horrendous things happening in the places like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan etc, where human rights are being ignored. Yet this is a concern for professional ethics, and it does not mean that we should allow Israel – which had continued its ethnic cleansing and illegal settlement building for decades – off the hook, especially when its professional work is so uniquely tied to government and military policy, constituting participation in war crimes. We must not allow action critical of Israel's policies to be seen as 'anti-Semitic', which is the accusation used by the pro-Israel lobby.

The ejection of the Israeli architects' associations – as was done by the UIA to the South African Institute of Architects during the days of apartheid – which is something that a world body of architects can do, would have a significant impact on the professional scene in Israel.

APJP has made several attempts at the UIA to take up the issue of Israeli membership at Council and Assembly meetings at Beijing, Turin, Brazil, and Sydney, and Tokyo.

As a result of our efforts, the UIA has confirmed a resolution that had been taken at the 2005 Assembly in Istanbul, again in Brazil, when the issue of Israel was raised that, *"The UIA Council condemns development projects and the construction of buildings on land that has been ethnically purified or illegally appropriated, and projects based on regulations that are ethnically or culturally discriminatory, and similarly it condemns all action contravening the fourth Geneva Convention."*

In fact we are now getting an increasing number of member countries that support our stance. It is only a matter of time before we can hope to see some positive steps being taken to implement the very resolution that was confirmed by them.

**DQ & AB:** Beyond this, could you discuss some of APJP's other advocacy work, notable successes to date, and whether you have noted any shifts in attitudes within the profession?

*Gehry's aborted scheme for "Museum of Tolerance" on Muslim cemetery in West Jerusalem*



**AH:** Since APJP was launched in 2005, we have made ourselves known in the architects' field and in the media, by advertisements in the Times, articles, letters and petitions that have generated lively responses and debates. Israel's Haaretz newspaper has carried articles about us, and our

very launch in Richard Rogers' office, and the debacle over his work in New York that was in jeopardy because of his initial association with us, gave us world wide publicity. Our website which has been going since then is a valuable source of news, information, data and events that attracts world-wide interest and a growing membership.

Since then we have managed to get architecture students from the illegal Israeli settlement of Ariel disqualified from an international solar house competition, by action from the Spanish Government, and have had architects like Frank Gehry and Norman Foster responding to our appeals to withdraw from major projects in Israel. We continually write to the Jerusalem Mayor and the Israeli, US and UK governments to stop the activities in biblical-fronted projects that dispossess Palestinians from their homes, the illegal building in the West Bank, and to lift the Gaza siege, and take part in solidarity actions and events. I also have been on speaking engagements in the US, Europe and around the UK to generate more support and in solidarity with Palestinians in their struggle for freedom. This is all ongoing and requires persistence and support from our members and the wider public. This does give us a presence on the architectural scene and more and more people in the profession, I feel, are sympathetic to our cause.

DQ & AB: Looking towards the future, do you also see potentials to harness APJP's network of professionals beyond this, perhaps engaging formally with Palestinian architecture bodies, or instigating architectural design competitions on themes relating to Palestine? Does the history of UKAAA offer any precedent in this regard?

AH: UKAAA did launch a competition, in conjunction with Building Design for a 'freedom' installation in Trafalgar Square opposite South Africa house, that would have been built had the apartheid regime not collapsed about the same time. What you are asking requires huge funding and resources and organization. What we have been doing is linking with the various groups that are doing such work, and trying to engage with schools of architecture here that are working with universities like Birzeit, and with RIWAQ, the Centre for Architectural Conservation, and in Gaza. Our attempts to link with Palestinian architecture bodies are limited so far, as they usually work under PA authorization in places like Ramallah, which is going in a very commercial direction, for example the new city Rawabi, designed on international, architecture lines.

Architectural competitions on Palestine related themes, like rebuilding the destroyed villages of 1948, would generate much interest, and if we can find partners for these projects, that is something that we will definitely consider for the future.



*Riwaq preventative conservation project in Obwin village, northwest of Ramallah.*

Abe Hayeem is an architect, peace activist and the chair and co-founder of Architects & Planners for Justice in Palestine. He has written for the Guardian Comment is Free, Architecture Week, Building Design, Palestine News, Red Pepper, and the IOA.