



Domination by Design: The Weaponization of Architecture and Urban Planning by the Israel Defense Forces

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Abstract

This paper inspects how the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the broader Israeli planning system have scientifically weaponized architecture and urban planning to uphold control over Palestinian territories, suppress resistance, and instill fear. Drawing on the frameworks of militarized urbanism and urban warfare theory, the study analyses spatial strategies including settlement design, bypass road networks, the construction of the separation wall, and the development of Urban Warfare Training Centres ('Fake Cities'). Data from field reports, academic literature, and primary evidence drawn from urban warfare doctrines (for example, the work of Shimon Naveh) reveal that the IDF deliberately integrates the built environment into its military strategy. Tactics such as penetrating homes by making holes in walls, fragmenting Palestinian communities with 60-foot-high walls, or training in simulated Muslim cities with Masjids and marketplaces, all demonstrate that architecture itself is transformed into an active weapon of domination. The findings suggest that these spatial practices constitute a form of psychological warfare aimed at breaking down social cohesion and producing long-lasting fear and uncertainty. The paper advocates for a human-centered, rights-based approach to replacing these structures of fear and promoting peace.

Keywords

Israel Defense Forces, Urban Warfare Training Centers, Weaponization of Architecture, Domination, Militarized Urbanism, 'Fake Cities'

Introduction

For decades, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been one of the world's most deeply rooted territorial and political disputes. While much has been written about its military, political, and legal aspects, less attention has been given to how architecture and urban planning serve as subtle yet potent tools in the struggle for dominance. This paper examines how the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in collaboration with Israeli planning authorities, have utilized architecture, planning, and spatial strategies to occupy, combat, and instill fear among Palestinians. The study focuses on the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, examining how urban form is deliberately manipulated for military and political objectives. The concept of militarized urbanism provides a useful lens for this analysis. As cities become the main stage for modern conflicts, the built environment itself is reshaped as a weapon. In the Palestinian context, this weaponization includes settlements designed for surveillance and control, the separation wall that breaks urban continuity, and bypass roads that fragment Palestinian territory. Beyond these, the IDF has constructed entire Urban Warfare Training Centers — 'Fake Cities' — in the Negev Desert, replicating dense Muslim cities with Masjids, markets, and playgrounds to train soldiers in domination tactics. Architecture is never neutral. As Eyal Weizman argues, the built

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environment under occupation acts as a 'political plastic' constantly reshaped to serve military, political, and psychological goals. Walls, roads, zoning rules, and building codes have been turned into instruments of control. Planning policy, similarly, has fragmented Palestinian space into enclaves, restricting mobility, social cohesion, and economic opportunity. A further dimension is the psychological impact. Checkpoints, curfews, demolitions, and high-rise destruction are designed to produce permanent anxiety among civilians.

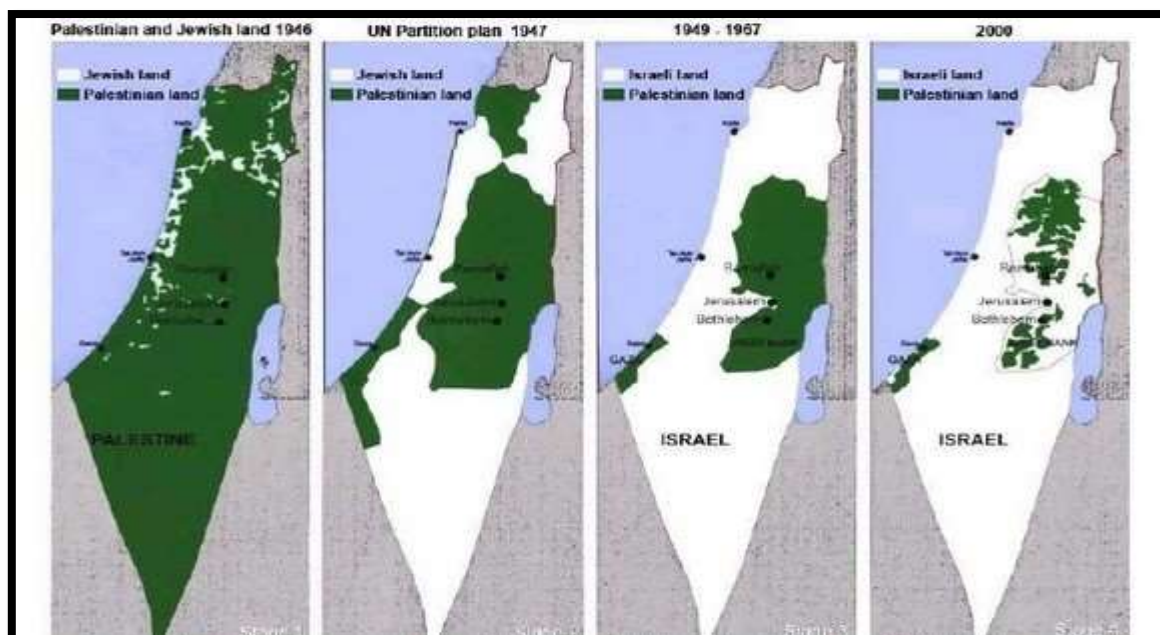


Figure 1 Timeline of Jewish settlements

This architecture of fear works in tandem with the physical architecture of domination, creating an integrated system of military and psychological oppression. This paper draws on field data, academic theory, and the presentation material provided to document these practices. Ultimately, it argues for a human-centered planning framework that deconstructs these architectures of fear and enables equitable, peaceful urban development.



Figure 2 Fake City

Background Theory

The use of urban planning and architecture as tools for military and political control is far from a recent development. Historically, occupying powers have restructured cities and landscapes to establish dominance, limit movement, and suppress opposition. However, the highly organized and technologically advanced methods applied in the Israeli–Palestinian context represent one of the most thoroughly analysed and theorized cases in modern critical urban studies. This chapter examines three central theoretical frameworks that help understand how the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) utilize space as a strategic weapon: urban warfare theory, militarized urbanism, and architectural control.

Urban Warfare Theory

Urban warfare theory focuses on how military forces conduct operations in densely built environments, where narrow streets, tall buildings, and the presence of civilians complicate traditional combat. Unlike battles in open terrain, fighting in urban areas requires armies to navigate chaotic, multi-layered environments. Scholars like Stephen Graham (2010) suggest that cities have become the epicenters of 21st-century conflict due to their dense populations, critical infrastructure, and concentrated political power. In such contexts, urban architecture serves not only as a defensive shield but also as a direct target.

In the case of Israel, the IDF has adopted military strategies that intertwine with architectural manipulation. Weizman (2007) highlights a tactic known as “walking through walls,” where soldiers breach internal walls of Palestinian homes rather than advancing through streets, minimizing exposure and maintaining tactical surprise. This approach illustrates how architecture has evolved from being a passive backdrop to becoming an active element of warfare.

Additionally, seizing control of urban high points — such as rooftops, towers, and elevated terrain — has become crucial in modern urban battles. These positions offer strategic advantages for surveillance, sniping, and rapid troop movement. Consequently, city architecture directly influences both the civilian experience and the dynamics of armed conflict, transforming urban neighborhoods into intricate combat zones (Yacobi, 2009).

Militarized Urbanism

Stephen Graham (2010) coined the term militarized urbanism to describe how military principles blend with urban planning. Under this model, everyday infrastructure such as roads, bridges, zoning laws, public transit, and surveillance systems are adapted to serve security goals. Importantly, militarized urbanism often continues beyond times of active conflict, becoming part of the governance in regions with ongoing unrest.

In Palestine, this concept is evident in structures like the separation wall, which not only restricts movement but also fragments towns and villages, disrupting economic and social networks. Hilltop settlements double as military outposts and surveillance centers, enforcing continuous oversight. Meanwhile, bypass roads facilitate settler mobility while excluding Palestinians, reinforcing a geography of segregation.

Graham’s framework helps connect these developments into a cohesive system rather than isolated planning decisions or tactical responses. The blurred line between civilian urban policy and military strategy creates what he calls a “seamless architecture of occupation.” Militarized urbanism also impacts the psychological sphere: frequent checkpoints, military presence, and sudden closures contribute to a normalized sense of emergency, shaping the everyday lives of Palestinians under occupation.

Architecture as Control

Eyal Weizman’s influential work, particularly *Hollow Land* (2007), provides perhaps the most compelling lens for analyzing Israeli spatial practices. He argues that architecture in the occupied territories functions as “political plastic”—a form that state power can shape to assert control. In this environment, elements like building permits, zoning rules, and urban planning are not neutral bureaucratic tools; they become instruments of dominance. Urban design is used strategically to divide, isolate, and destabilize Palestinian communities.

One clear example is the permit regime in Area C of the West Bank, where Palestinians face extraordinary barriers to legal construction, while Israeli settlements continue to grow with government backing. This results in widespread home demolitions under the guise of legal enforcement, generating constant fear and instability.

Weizman also reveals how physical structures themselves are used in combat. During operations, IDF soldiers frequently breach internal walls, converting civilian homes into tactical corridors. Architecture becomes a fluid battlefield—constantly reshaped to meet military demands. Walls intended to provide privacy and safety are repurposed as entry points and routes of invasion, exemplifying how architecture is weaponized strategically, politically, and psychologically (Weizman, 2011).

Historical Overview of Spatial Control in Palestine

The layout of land and space in Palestine and Israel has been shaped over decades through a combination of strategic planning, legal frameworks, and military actions—each designed to exert control over territory, resources, and people. While militarized urbanism and the weaponization of architecture are often linked to the post-1967 period, their roots run deeper, embedded in earlier colonial and geopolitical structures. This chapter traces the major stages in the evolution of spatial control, revealing the political motives that are physically inscribed into the landscape (Yacobi, 2009).

Pre-1967 Planning and Spatial Fragmentation

Before the 1967 war, colonial forces had already begun shaping the spatial landscape. During the British Mandate (1917–1948), land was categorized into “state,” “private,” and “absentee” classes—definitions that would later be instrumental for Israel in seizing and reallocating Palestinian lands. British planning also introduced Western urban design models, which often disregarded or disrupted traditional Palestinian settlement structures and social networks (Yacobi, 2009).

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, this process intensified. Hundreds of Palestinian villages were destroyed or depopulated, and new Jewish towns were built in their place (Khalidi, 1992). The 1950 Absentee Property Law enabled the Israeli state to claim vast stretches of land because Palestinian owners had fled or been expelled during the war. These early policies laid the legal and spatial foundation for later waves of expropriation and resettlement (Falah, 2005).

Post-1967 Spatial Strategies

The 1967 war marked a critical turning point, as Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza—placing millions of Palestinians under military rule. From that point, spatial control became a central strategy of the occupation. The West Bank was divided into military zones, and Israeli settlements began to spring up on key hilltops—intended to create irreversible “facts on the ground” that would complicate future withdrawal efforts.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this process accelerated. Settlements were deliberately placed on elevated terrain to ensure maximum visibility and territorial dominance. These settlements were linked by bypass roads, designed primarily for settlers, which sliced through Palestinian areas and divided them into fragmented, disconnected communities. The architectural design of the settlements was intentional, meant to convey permanence and a sense of superiority over neighboring Palestinian villages (Weizman, 2007).

At the same time, Palestinian construction was tightly controlled through military orders. Permits were rarely granted, and buildings constructed without permission were subject to demolition. This dual-track approach—expanding Israeli settlements while restricting Palestinian growth—created a sharp spatial and socioeconomic imbalance.

The Oslo Process and the Divisions of the Palestinian Territory

The 1993 Oslo Accords added another layer to spatial governance. The West Bank was divided into Areas A, B, and C, each subject to different levels of Palestinian and Israeli control. Area C—covering over 60% of the West Bank—remained under complete Israeli jurisdiction, particularly in planning and construction. As a result, Palestinians living in Area C found it nearly impossible to obtain building permits, and many existing structures were designated as “illegal,” making them vulnerable to demolition (Khalidi, 1992).

Oslo also institutionalized the concept of disconnected Palestinian enclaves. Palestinian self-rule was confined to small, non-contiguous areas, while movement between them required Israeli military approval through a complex system of permits, roadblocks, and checkpoints. Critics argue that this system entrenched a fragmented geography that undermines the possibility of a unified, sovereign Palestinian state (Falah, 2005).

Spatial Tactics of The IDF

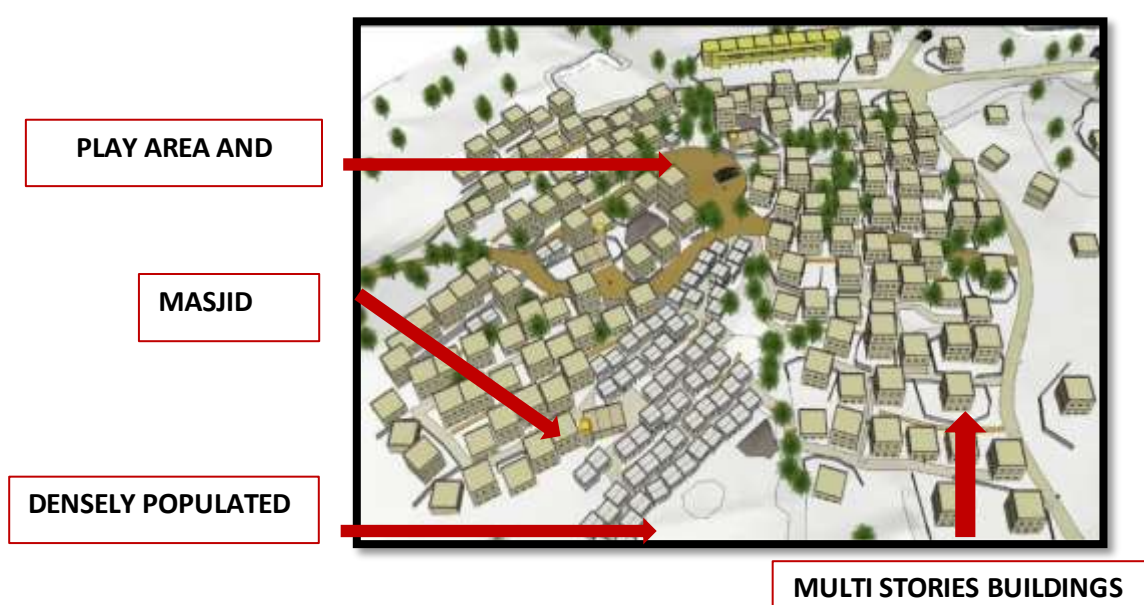
The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have developed sophisticated methods to deploy architecture and urban planning as weapons of control. These tactics combine hard power — including military interventions, demolitions, and occupation — with soft power strategies that reshape the built environment to intimidate, fragment, and subdue. Drawing on insights from Shimon Naveh, a key figure in the development of Israeli urban warfare doctrine, this chapter unpacks how these spatial strategies work in practice (Weizman, 2011).

Urban Warfare Training Centers (“Fake City”)

One of the most telling examples of architecture used for war preparation is the Urban Warfare Training Center, sometimes called “Fake City,” built in the Negev Desert. According to your presentation, this facility simulates a dense Muslim city, complete with:

- 600 buildings
- Up to 8-story residential towers
- Masjid
- Shopping centers
- communal play areas
- narrow streets

These simulated spaces allow IDF soldiers to rehearse tactics for controlling Palestinian urban environments, including **house-to-house penetration** (moving through walls), controlling Masjids, and dealing with densely populated civilian areas. The presence of playgrounds, shopping streets, and communal spaces in the fake city shows how deeply the IDF studies and rehearses subduing everyday civilian urban life, treating the city itself as a battlefield (Khalidi, 1992).

**Checkpoints, Roads, and Bypass Networks**

On the ground, the IDF and Israeli planning authorities have developed a road system that divides Palestinian territory into disconnected enclaves. Bypass roads allow settlers to travel freely between settlements while avoiding Palestinian areas, simultaneously isolating Palestinian towns and limiting their growth. This tactic creates separation that is physical, social, and psychological.



Figure 3 holes for entering the building

Settlement Strategies

- dominate strategic hilltops
- create a sense of “visual superiority”
- encourage new Israeli populations through incentives (citizenship offers, job opportunities abroad)
- turn Palestinian private spaces into public or militarized spaces
- fortify with inhuman-scale walls, sometimes up to **60 feet high**



Turning Private Space Into Public Space



Figure 5 Fearing the Palestinian people

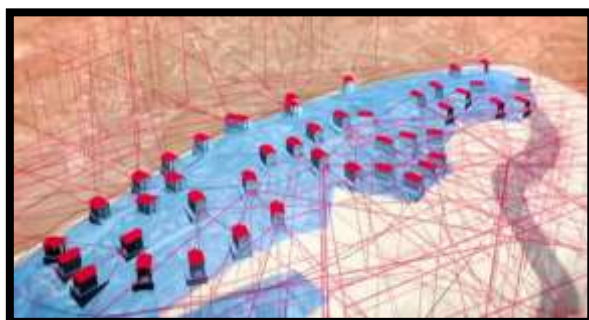


Figure 6 Fake settlements for domination

Tactics Inside Palestinian Houses

A notable tactic described by Naveh is penetrating homes internally, rather than moving through streets, to capture fighters. This includes:

- making holes in residential walls
- forcing Palestinian fighters or residents out into exposed streets
- using homes as temporary IDF positions
- destroying internal partitions

This turns houses — symbols of family and security — into unstable, violated spaces, fueling psychological trauma.

Psychological Warfare Tactics

Other tactics mentioned include:

- dropping warning notes and “fake bombs” to sow panic
- systematically buying land from Palestinians through intermediaries, then using it for military or settlement purposes
- changing public communal spaces into militarized or private areas
- constant surveillance through watchtowers

The goal is to break down Palestinian social unity, replacing a cohesive urban society with fragmented, fearful communities.



Figure 7 holes in residential walls



Figure 8 Dividing the Palestinian urban areas

Watchtowers and Vertical Domination

Concrete watchtowers, often placed near settlements and along the separation wall, play a vital psychological role. They create a constant sense of being watched, symbolizing total control of vertical space and discouraging resistance or protest. This vertical dimension of domination is a key element in modern urban warfare.



Figure 9 Concrete watchtowers to show presence

Table 4.1: Spatial Tactics of the IDF

Tactic		Purpose	Examples
Urban Warfare Training Centers		Prepare soldiers for Palestinian urban combat	"Fake City" in Negev with 600 buildings, Masjid, shops
Settlements on hilltops		Surveillance, territorial dominance	West Bank settlements (e.g., Ariel, Ma'ale Adumim)
Bypass roads		Segregation, movement control	Road 443 bypass Palestinian towns
Separation Wall		Fragment Palestinian territory, annex land	700+ km barrier through the West Bank
House penetration tactics		Surprise attacks, urban maneuvering	Knocking holes in walls during raids
Watchtowers and elevated positions		Psychological and surveillance dominance	Concrete towers along the Separation Wall
Buying land from Palestinians		Expand settlements subtly	Citizenship or cash incentives for property purchases
Fake warnings / fake bombs		Spread panic	Leaflet drops during Gaza conflicts
Re-zoning public spaces		Reduce communal resilience	Converting shared spaces into militarized zones
Walls up to 60 ft high		Fear, fortification, and movement restriction	Gaza and West Bank barriers

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has examined how the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), working alongside Israeli state planning authorities, have deliberately weaponized architecture and urban planning as part of a broader system of control over Palestinian territories. Through a critical look at militarized urbanism, settlement strategies, bypass roads, and Urban Warfare Training Centers, it becomes clear that the built environment has been purposefully shaped to serve as a mechanism of domination.

Tactics such as building settlements on strategic hilltops, erecting 60-foot walls, conducting military operations by breaching homes from within, and training in simulated Muslim cities all point to the fact that architecture in this context functions well beyond its conventional roles of shelter or design. Instead, it becomes a tool for surveillance, societal fragmentation, restricted movement, and deep psychological harm.

The historical overview further illustrated that these strategies are not isolated or improvised, but part of a long continuum of spatial control dating back to the British Mandate and the post-1948 period. In Gaza, the Dahiya Doctrine and repeated destruction of urban infrastructure have created a spatial condition of constant emergency, undermining any prospects for recovery or stability.

Moreover, the IDF's urban warfare doctrine, especially as developed by figures like Shimon Naveh, reveals an intellectual and operational commitment to treating the city as a pliable battlefield — one where buildings, streets, mosques, and public spaces are actively re-scripted to serve military ends. The "Fake City" training centers institutionalize this mindset, normalizing the control of civilian spaces through architectural simulation.

The cumulative effect of these tactics is the creation of what this paper terms an **"architecture of fear"** — a deliberately designed environment intended to suppress, intimidate, and disempower Palestinian life. Such environments not only violate international humanitarian law and human rights principles but also inflict long-term psychological, social, and economic damage on Palestinian communities.

Recommendations

1. **Demilitarization of Urban Planning**
Urban and regional planning in the occupied territories must be removed from military control and reoriented toward citizen needs, equity, and reconciliation.
2. **International Oversight and Accountability**
International institutions, including the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, must investigate the spatial dimensions of occupation and hold planners and policymakers accountable for practices that violate international law.
3. **Architectural Advocacy and Resistance**
Architects, planners, and scholars must play a proactive role in documenting, exposing, and challenging the weaponization of space. Design can be reimagined as a tool of resistance and recovery, rather than domination.
4. **Restoration of Spatial Continuity**
Efforts must be made to reconnect fragmented Palestinian areas, dismantle illegal settlement infrastructure, and restore freedom of movement through a rights-based urban agenda.
5. **Support for Community Resilience**
Investments in Palestinian urban development, education, and infrastructure should prioritize local agency, memory, and cultural identity, empowering communities to reclaim their spatial rights.

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