

Israeli government censors architectural exhibition

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In an effort to stifle and conceal mounting opposition within Israel to the war against the Palestinians, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has initiated a witch-hunt against two prize-winning architects and prevented their work from being displayed at the World Congress of Architecture in Berlin, Germany and at the Venice Biennale in Italy.

The move came when the cultural representative of Shimon Peres, foreign minister in the Likud-Labor coalition government, inspected display boards and a catalog titled, "A Civilian Occupation, the Politics of Israeli Architecture." The work, compiled and edited by architects Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal, had won a national competition to represent Israel at the World Congress of the Union Internationale des Architectes (UIA), which convened in July in Berlin.

The exhibition examines Jewish settlements built over the last century. Articles by geographer Oren Yftachel, architects Sharon Rotbard and Zvi Efrat and journalists Gideon Levy and Meron Benvenisti appear in the catalog, as does an interview with architect Tommy Leitsdorf, who planned the towns of Ma'ale Adumim and Emmanuel. Photographs by Milutin Labudovic, Miki Kratzman, Pavel Wohlberg and others also appear in the catalog, as do maps, plans and diagrams of the settlements.

A map, prepared jointly by Eyal Weizman and B'tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, was a central feature of the exhibition scheduled for Berlin, as well as figuring prominently in the Israeli Pavilion, which is currently on view at the Venice Biennale. In both cases, the map became a target for censorship. At Berlin, the entire exhibition was suppressed. In Venice, the exhibition went forward, but the map was altered to obscure its political content.

The banned catalog explains the controversial message, which the map conveys, stating, "This map is an up to date description of the Israeli settlement project in the West Bank. It marks the location, size and form of Israeli settlements, the scope of their potential expansion, and the total amount of State Land at their disposal. The built-up areas of the settlements occupy only 1.7% of the land in the West Bank, but their municipal boundaries and regional councils control a total of 41.9% of the land."

The map provides graphic information about both Jewish and Palestinian habitation and shows "how the settling of 380,000 Israelis in the West Bank achieved the complete fragmentation of the territory." The text describes the care taken by its authors and the difficulties they encountered in compiling information. "The map is a synthesis of a large number of maps, master plans, regional plans, and other data," it states, and "is the outcome of an eleven-month process of collection, analysis and charting. The 150 original settlement master plans proved difficult to get hold of. Obtaining them usually necessitated traveling to individual settlements, sometimes even legal action against deliberate delays."

"A most noticeable feature of the map," write Segal and Weizman, "is the disparity between the settlements, municipal boundaries and their actual built-up areas. Since settlements can still grow within their existing boundaries, this map, besides describing a present set of affairs, in fact, outlines a possible future."

Alarmed by its critique of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, Peres's agent immediately phoned the President of the Israel Association of United Architects (IAUA), the Israel Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the National Lottery to force the display's withdrawal. Describing their depiction of the West Bank, Eyal

Weizman told the WSWS by telephone from Tel Aviv, “Any Israeli who sees it is shocked. What the map shows is the size and distribution of the Jewish settlements and the areas, which are designated for future expansion. It reveals what is not understood.”

Weizman went on to explain the difficulty for Israelis in obtaining a clear understanding of what is happening. “There is always camouflage, a type of smokescreen, when you ask about the settlements,” he said. “Complexity has become a technique. Explanations are very Talmudic and complex—a lot of verbal rhetoric. It is all very alienating. If you are not an expert, you cannot say anything. The same drive for complexity is what is behind the action of the Foreign Ministry.”

With co-editor Rafi Segal, an architect who has won both the Young Artist Prize and the Young Architect Prize of the Israel Association of United Architects (IAUA), Weizman has undertaken a historical review of the architecture and planning in the Occupied Territories. “Our idea was to give it form, so people understand it,” he told us. “We have to be precise and clear. There are human rights issues in these structures. They are illegal. They have to be dismantled.”

IAUA President Uri Zerubavel responded to the intervention by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by denouncing the architects, withdrawing support for the exhibition and threatening further legal and professional reprisals. In his letter, terminating the exhibit, Zerubavel wrote, “We prohibit any connection between the exhibition, the paraphernalia of the exhibition and the catalog and the Israel Association of United Architects.”

The IAUA chief concluded his letter by threatening to deregister the authors. “The damage caused by you to the association is great, and we are assessing it,” he wrote. “Any breach of our demands in this matter, any use of the association’s name or of its members and heads in connection to the exhibition paraphernalia will cause us to take steps against you, and this is beyond the damage that has already been caused to our image in Israel and the world.”

Rafi Segal explained that the IAUA had been well informed about the content of the exhibition in advance. The theme and many of the contributions to the catalog had been presented as part of the competition held last year; and subsequently regular

meetings were held. “We had a monthly meeting for seven months with this committee,” he said. “They knew the contents. They saw the photos. They knew who was going to write.”

Despite the fact that the selection process had been conducted publicly, the IAUA chief reported to the press that the association had been deceived. “The association is apolitical,” he said, terming the catalog “an anti-Israeli, one-sided presentation, with totalitarian graphics, pictures of soldiers and tanks, every page about Israeli occupation. We could not accept it.” He did admit, however, that the executive committee of the association was split 15 to 5 over the decision to censor it. If the IAUA is not political, its president must explain why the leading committee convened for the sole purpose of executing a political attack on two of its members.

In response to the attack, other members of the IAUA mounted an exhibition in support of Weizman and Segal, showing all the competition entries alongside a single copy of the banned catalog. The association executive committee demanded that the exhibitors include a separate wall for the competition photographs and writings submitted by Segal and Weizman last year. The implication was that the chiefs had been willfully deceived. But when the exhibitors complied with their request, the photographs and writings from the competition and from the catalogue proved to be substantially the same. No deception had occurred. The only reasonable conclusion to be drawn is that a change in attitude at the IAUA was brought about by the intervention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



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