

About the author

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High ground offers three strategic assets: greater tactical strength, self-protection, and a wider view. This principle is as long as military history itself. The Crusaders' castles, some built not far from the location of today's settlements, operated through "the reinforcement of strength already provided by nature". These series of mountaintop fortresses were military instruments for the territorial domination of the Latin kingdom.

The Jewish settlements in the West Bank are not very different. Not only places of residence, they create a large-scale network of "civilian fortification" which is part of the army's regional plan of defence, generating tactical territorial surveillance. A simple act of domesticity, a single family home shrouded in the cosmetic facade of red tiles and green lawns, conforms to the aims of territorial control.

But unlike the fortresses and military camps of previous periods, the settlements are sometimes without fortifications. Up until recently, only a few settlements agreed to be surrounded by walls or fences. They argued that they must form a continuity with the holy landscape; that it is the Palestinians who need to be fenced in.

During the recent days of Intifadah, many settlements were attacked and debate returned over the effect of fences. Extremist settlers claimed that protection could be exercised solely through the power of vision, rendering the material protection of a fortified wall redundant and even obstructive.

Indeed, the form of the mountain settlements is constructed according to a geometric system that unites the effectiveness of sight with spatial order, producing "panoptic fortresses", generating gazes to many different ends. Control – in the overlooking of Arab town and villages; strategy – in the overlooking of main traffic arteries; self-defence – in the overlooking of the immediate surroundings and approach roads. Settlements could be seen as urban optical devices for surveillance and the exercise of power.

In 1984 the Ministry of Housing published guidance for new construction in the mountain region, advising: "Turning openings in the direction of the view is usually identical with turning them in the direction of the slope ... [the optimal view depends on] the positioning of the buildings and on the distances between them, on the density, the gradient of the slope and the vegetation".

That principle applies most easily to the outer ring of homes. The inner rings are positioned in front of the gaps between the homes of the first ring. This arrangement of the homes around summits, outward-looking, imposes on the dwellers axial visibility (and lateral invisibility), oriented in two directions: inward and outward.

Discussing the interior of each building, the guidance recommends the orientation of the sleeping rooms towards the inner public spaces and the living rooms towards the distant view. The inward-oriented gaze protects the soft cores of the settlements, the outward-oriented one surveys the landscape below. Vision dictated the discipline and mode of design on every level, even down to the precise positioning of windows: as if, following Paul Virilio, "the function of arms and the function of the eye were indefinitely identified as one and the same".

Seeking safety in vision, Jewish settlements are intensely illuminated. At night, from a distance they are visible as brilliant white streaks of light. From within them, the artificial light shines so brightly as to confuse diurnal rhythms. This is in stark contrast to Palestinian cities: seeking their safety in invisibility, they employ blackouts as a routine of protection from aerial attacks.

In his verdict in support of the “legality” of settlement, Israeli High Court Justice Vitkon argued, “One does not have to be an expert in military and security affairs to understand that terrorist elements operate more easily in an area populated only by an indifferent population or one that supports the enemy, as opposed to an area in which there are persons who are likely to observe them and inform the authorities about any suspicious movement. Among them no refuge, assistance, or equipment will be provided to terrorists. The matter is simple, and details are unnecessary.”

The settlers come to the high places for the “regeneration of the soul”. But in placing them across the landscape, the Israeli government is drafting its civilian population alongside the agencies of state power, to inspect and control the Palestinians. Knowingly or not, settlers’ eyes, seeking a completely different view, are being ‘hijacked’ for strategic and geopolitical aims.

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