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Salem Al Qudwa

Abstract

This paper aims to visually study the simple objects that exist around us and the buildings people live in, in order to account for how a simple architectural language can help in the current situation in the Gaza Strip. A descriptive analytical method was adopted as the main methodological tool in order to gather information about existing minimalist objects and ordinary architecture in Gaza. Field investigations were conducted in order to photograph different areas in the Strip's communities: Gaza city, rural-to-urban areas, and marginalized areas were compared to well-known minimalist artworks. Minimalist architecture in Gaza is not an alternative paradigm but a consequence of the current situation of material resources, building techniques, and form-making processes. This paper aims to show that, by using certain aesthetic design strategies, such as a particular arrangement of building elements and patterns, a more livable architecture can be obtained that advances aesthetic values, such as a sense of order, simplicity, and clarity, thus enabling a particular enjoyment of beauty.

Key Words

aesthetic value, basic geometry, Gaza, minimalism, minimalist art, minimalist architecture, new vernacular, simple architecture

1. Introduction

Minimalism is used to describe an architectural design approach according to which the represented object is reduced to its essential elements. Minimalist architecture is characterized by an economy of materials and the distillation of functional requirements to essences, such as light, form, texture, space and scale, place, and human conditions. Concerning architecture, and for the purposes of this visual research, other relevant aspects of minimalism include the use of basic geometric forms, raw materials, and the repetition of structures.

In Gaza, however, we find yet another aspect of minimalism that has to do with the reduction of every day life to a bare minimum. Persistent violence has led Israel to restrict access to fuel, electricity, and other basic resources to levels falling far below the area's normal requirements.^[1] The scarcity of these essential resources is only made worse by the overcrowding in Gaza, since the people there are residing in one of the most densely populated stretches of land in the world.

The Gaza Strip is a narrow land area located in the vicinity of the southeastern Mediterranean Sea, with a length of about forty-one kilometers and a width ranging from six to twelve kilometers. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, at the end of 2016, there were approximately two million inhabitants living in the Strip, an area comprising 365 square kilometers.^[2] The Strip is linked to the outside world through five border crossings, four with Israel and one with Egypt. All materials and goods required by people in the Gaza Strip must officially enter through the Israeli border crossings, whereas the Egyptian crossing is only employed for the movement of people. Access to the Mediterranean Sea is limited to three nautical miles along the Strip's coastline.^[3] The area has had to cope with difficult circumstances, such as low income and a high rate of unemployment, and a state of siege that prohibits the entry of many essential items, including construction materials.

As cities expand upwards, the urban life of their citizens shifts from horizontal to vertical. Urban life in the Gaza Strip has been shaped by periods of growth along with periods of crisis, and it is these that have brought about transformations in the culture, social structure, and urban landscape. In this sense, open spaces have evolved into closed spaces, producing a form of signage that is specific for box-like buildings. The majority of residential buildings in the Strip are characterized by their cement, uneven, rough layers of plaster on unfinished brick walls, and convenient simple structure. They are even designated as 'boxes' by locals.

The current unstable economic situation and the lack of access to building materials because of the Israeli blockade often force families to build lower quality houses. Most of these houses do not look beautiful and seem to have been built in the 1970s or the 1980s, displaying the impact of the new vernacular architecture in the Strip.^[4] The minimalist architecture in the Gaza Strip does not occur as a purposeful deployment of an alternative paradigm but as a consequence of the current local situation of material resources and building techniques, and of the form-making process. This paper discusses, however, the use of minimalist architecture principles and its visual aspects as a source of contemporary aesthetic in buildings.

2. Self-built buildings and uncertainty of planning in the Gaza Strip

In this dense urban area, residential buildings display a wide variety of

housing qualities, ranging from extremely solid concrete frame constructions equipped with all services to squalid windowless shacks made of concrete blocks. Those buildings and the people who live in them are not all the same. Some occupants in Gaza are able to raise enough funds to improve their dwellings to middle-class standards, while others continue to live in the most basic shelters, unable to afford any improvements at all.

Out of necessity, and for reasons of economy, buildings in the Gaza Strip have tended to be reduced to their bare essentials. The main concern of many people has been to build a shelter whose shape and form is the most economical. Gazans build individual homes for all sorts of reasons but mainly because they want to build something tailored to their family's requirements. Single and extended family houses are scattered throughout the Strip and aligned to the outer perimeter of Gaza City. Consisting of a slab of living spaces, raised on pilotis, and with a flat roof, they look like local variations of the modernistic villa. It was, indeed, the influence of early modernism that first arrived in the region, reaching its zenith in the 1930s and filtering through across the Strip via Palestinian construction workers, almost to the point of becoming the new vernacular.^[5]

In Gaza, nowadays, the lack of urban and regional planning and property management is a critical issue. Building licenses are granted liberally, existing land use regulations are often ignored, and the Strip lacks experience with planning mechanisms, in general. At the same time, the population is increasing while the available land is decreasing. Building forms and spatial relations are dictated by the lifestyle of extended families and the needs of the occupants (Figure 1), rather than by the intended composition of a designer, if there is a designer at all! As for the role of the architect, until the late 1980s, the architect did not necessarily have to be involved in the design process, and the building process itself could be approved even without the architect's signature.^[6]



Figure 1. A typical self-built house in the Gaza Strip where forms are mainly dictated by needs of the occupants. Building without architects is a common practice in Gaza, where good and low-skilled workers regularly undertake work towards maintaining the quality of buildings while almost all poor houses go without plastering their outside or, often, even inside walls.

3. Minimizing construction and architectural components in the Gaza Strip

Building techniques in most of the local buildings are kept simple and minimal because skills are not technologically advanced. Each individual building deviates little from rational arrangement and construction, both of which result from the local climate, materials, skills, and knowledge. The geometry of buildings is dictated by the materials available for construction and by the topography of the landscape. In order to build in the most efficient way, materials and components have to be put together according to their inherent properties, including size and shape. This gives a sense of order to an architecture that is not based on conceptual ideas but on immediate

commonsense logic and the rationale of local place-making.^[7] And while the architectural project is generally understood to bring about order in space, order and rhythm in the Gaza Strip may not, at first, appear to inform the quality of building work, or may not be easily discernible. Nevertheless, it could be argued that in spite of structures being traditionally built with the local knowledge and the few trades available, buildings in Gaza are no less poetic than those resulting from an orderly and detailed planning process.



Figure 2. Hollow concrete blocks with which local work crews in the Gaza Strip are well versed.

Another consideration is the client's budget that demands that architects work with local builders and determines the choice of the main building component, concrete masonry units (Figure 2) that are the only popular material with which the workers have experience. Following typical architectural plans, workers employ poured concrete and concrete masonry units as some of their principal building blocks. Blocks are then coated with a lime plaster wash in order to protect the building against dampness, and are arranged with apertures that provide screening and filter daylight into interior spaces. Responding to the limitations of the local workforce, plans employ simple construction techniques and materials. The focus is on using every day materials in different ways, with no interest in innovating with material.

4. Recasting minimalist art in the Gaza Strip

Objects do not just stand in an autonomous space that ensures their separateness from their surroundings. They take place in what sculptor Donald Judd describes as an actual space; they share a space in which the viewer's body is also located. Judd's objects challenged the idea that the presence of the artist's hand is tantamount to quality aesthetics, or that, in other words, the effect of a minimalist artwork in an exhibition would vanish were no one to place it in a frame or on a pedestal. In this sense, for example, the most impressive photographs of minimalist artworks are those that do not isolate the minimalist artworks but show them in their surroundings.^[8]

As this paper looks at the relevance of minimalist art to every day architectural practices in Gaza, it should be pointed out that only a small number of people in Gaza are able to look at paintings and sculptures because there are few exhibitions and galleries available. In general, sculptors, art experts, and critics have to receive their education abroad, whether in other Arab countries or in Europe. Access to art has been limited to school education and a few other activities, such as annual exhibitions organized by certain artist associations, owing to which the professional status of artists also became more established. As the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip have constantly been in a condition of political instability, in addition to the dire economic situation, an ordinary citizen looked upon art only in terms of its usefulness as a technique (Figure 3), and it was thus no accident that this period saw primarily the development of the applied arts.^[9]



Figure 3. Similar to the grid formats of minimalist artist Carl Andre, a local had arranged bricks in a particular manner.

From this point of view, residential buildings in the Gaza Strip may look like disorganized groups of gray concrete boxes crowded together. However, if you look beyond these outer layers and begin to examine everything that goes on underneath them, you find that a complex web of human life-support systems is at work in these dwellings.^[10] In a manner that is convergent with minimalist art, though not necessarily directly informed by it, place- and space-making techniques in Gaza display resourcefulness, not hopelessness.

Another example is that of ordinary Palestinian women in the Gaza Strip, who are accustomed to preparing traditional flat bread for their families, using wheat flour received from humanitarian aid agencies. Baking bread at home saves hundreds of shekels on groceries every year. Freshly-baked bread is prepared every day at some houses. Similar to the basic arrangements of minimal art shapes, women lay clean circular surfaces of dough and repeat the pieces of dough in rows and columns (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Dough circles repeated in rows and columns, as they were prepared by a poor woman inside an empty room, in the Gaza Strip.

The natural light entering through the aluminum frame of windows into each empty room fills up the actual space of the house, and the metallic safety designs further enhance the general sense of simplicity, order, and abstraction that characterizes the room (Figure 5).



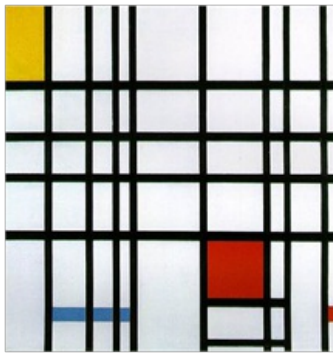


Figure 5. Horizontal and vertical lines, a typical aluminum window in Gaza (a) vs. a painting (b), [homage to Mondrian](#).

Minimal arts seek to advance a certain type of beauty, yet surely this aesthetic aspect does not restrict their potential for improving life. Beauty as a consequence of utility in the industrial arts is not at variance with the freedom from practical attitudes, for beauty is still in the realm of perception, of contemplation, not in that of utility. No matter how much of an artist a builder or a potter may be, she or he is necessarily controlled by the practical needs that houses and pots are called to provide, the more so that applied art consists in the application of design and aesthetics to objects of function and everyday use. Whereas fine arts serve as an intellectual stimulation to the viewer or to those with academic sensibilities, along with being produced or intended primarily for beauty, the applied arts incorporate design and creative ideals to objects of utility, such as a cup, magazine, or decorative park bench. There is considerable overlap between the field of applied arts and that of the decorative arts; to some extent, they are also alternative terms.^[11]





Figure 6. Stacks of construction materials.

The aesthetics of raw materials, the relationship of objects to the actual space, the effects of natural light on street volumes, these are all available features within the visual context of the Gaza Strip, producing highly reduced arrangements. Following these basic principles, local minimal art sculptures were primarily made from industrial materials, such as natural stone, wood, concrete, steel, aluminum, glass, and plastic. These objects, frequently reduced to very simple geometric shapes, were industrially produced, thus removing the artist's personal signature from the work. The works were also characterized by serial arrangements of a number of shapes in small and medium dimensions. In a similar display but lacking an intended artistic concern, freestanding objects, such as metallic tubes and wooden stacks, can currently be seen lying in the streets of the Gaza Strip, with their circular and rectangular ends being repeated in horizontal and vertical linear patterns (Figure 6). Wood pallets, stacks of plywood, and rusty tubes appear as highly similar to the sculptural works of minimal art, with their focus on the formal aspects of composition. While watching the blacksmith at his workshop working the metal with a hammer and anvil, or the carpenter working at his wood parts, one can see that they are also making pieces of sculpture, keeping the process simple, in addition to cheap and affordable.

Moving through the streets of the Strip, one can see solid and hollow cement blocks arranged as three-dimensional works in modular and grid formats, in a sculptured pattern that is similar to Donald Judd's minimalist cubes. And while the artists Donald Judd, Carl André, and Richard Serra achieved their aesthetic effect by controlling the context, their simple raw forms are typically viewed in a very simple and clean museum or gallery setting. On the other hand, and with no intentional aesthetic concerns, local workers in the Gaza Strip arrange the blocks geometrically in their own ways, according to block thickness. Other static minimalistic objects on display in the streets of the Gaza Strip are wooden stacks for construction materials, stacks of wood and cement bricks in a unit-bar version, and concrete masses (Figure 7). While these objects are simply scattered throughout the streets of the Gaza Strip, many of them can also be viewed as accidental sculptures that embody the concepts of minimal art, displaying aesthetic strategies like repetition and symmetry.



Figure 7. Static and self-standing minimalist objects in a dirty urban environment of Gaza.

5. Gray boxes and the form making process in the Gaza Strip

On a larger scale, wherever there are many buildings together, type is minimized as forms are repeated across the site. For larger buildings that have a natural tendency to be more complex than smaller buildings, it may be necessary to reduce complexity through repetition.^[12] Thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip live in moderate dwellings or poor shelters that have gradually become permanent settlements. The over-crowded residential buildings are equipped with cement blocks for internal and external walls, and with flat-slab concrete roofing. A generic form or type can be repeated to accommodate a complex dwelling brief. In this way, the range of different forms and building types is minimized. The same can be said about the repetitive use of building products and components used in the building process that come together to form a simple whole.

In this visual analytical study, I discussed some of the minimalist characteristics of buildings and architectural forms and components in the Gaza Strip. Nevertheless, it should equally be remembered that the existing aesthetic quality is also a result of the economic and political state of affairs. At the same time, buildings emerge as responses to their physical surroundings. This is so obvious in the plan of residential buildings in the Gaza Strip, which took many of its cues from the existing structures on the plots.



Figure 8. Repetitive use of building products and components in Gaza.

The existing concrete, gray boxes are uncluttered by formal concepts. Quite simply, there was a certain way to build structures, and most buildings were made that way (Figure 8). The absence of concepts produced visual simplicity of form and a certain aesthetic appearance. It should be noted,

equally, that, with regard to the basic cubic forms, humans naturally tend to build cubic forms. Examples of architectural abstraction can also be easily seen in the streets of the Strip (Figure 9). At the same time, the gray color of concrete can be noticed while moving through the city roads and neighborhoods. And while gray might be the first image that comes to mind when we think of concrete, this can also add an element of style, of raw beauty, to buildings.



Figure 9. Approaching the real cube: a simple brick and concrete structure in Gaza that has the power of minimalist work, while meeting local needs and budgets.

6. Conclusion

The minimalist paradigm in architecture is about the search for the essences of the human condition, such as place, material, texture, space, and light. The process of stripping down, the need to get down to the bare bones, coincides with existing building techniques. The minimalist space that results is tantamount to a void in which one can listen to figures with a pure and unconstrained eye, in order to rediscover the many universal qualities that are contained in the everyday simplest and most common-place objects. In the Gaza Strip minimalist architecture is not an alternative paradigm but a consequence of the current situation of material resources, building techniques, and form-making processes. The simplicity and aesthetic qualities of these minimalist buildings highlight the need for a deep, cultural understanding of the existing situation. One finds simplicity in the visual appearance of architectural forms, and in the analysis of the many elements that make up our daily life. The majority of buildings in the Strip are simple, with an architecture of minimal appearance, without any additives or decoration, but minimalism also applies with respect to the geometric form of buildings, and their composition and methods of construction. The number of materials, components, and joints used in constructing the building is also minimized. The outcome displays a profusion of aspects that detail the innovative synthesis of interior functionality, space, mass, light, and aesthetics, all of which merge in minimalist designs and architecture.

This visual research is not a remake of minimalism but redeployment of its concepts in order to draw attention to the potential of architecture. In other words, to bring into contact two worlds, one is the world of art, in particular here, minimalism, the other is the everyday world of the average Gaza family.

The upshot of the discussion undertaken in this paper is that beauty is in everything, especially in everyday life, and inspiration comes from simple everyday objects. Ordinary people can take some amazing pictures just by looking at everyday objects, thus emphasizing certain aesthetic details of things. This researcher has taken many pictures that are rich in everyday aesthetics and in aspects of good quality buildings (Figure 10). Such pictures offer a glimpse into everyday life to the never-satisfied local aesthete, or they may be an invitation for others to travel to those areas of the Gaza Strip.



Figure 10. A powerful dichotomy of the richness of imagery and the simplicity of the things surrounding people in the actual space in Gaza.

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Endnotes

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