



# Sedek

A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba

Towards return  
of Palestinian refugees

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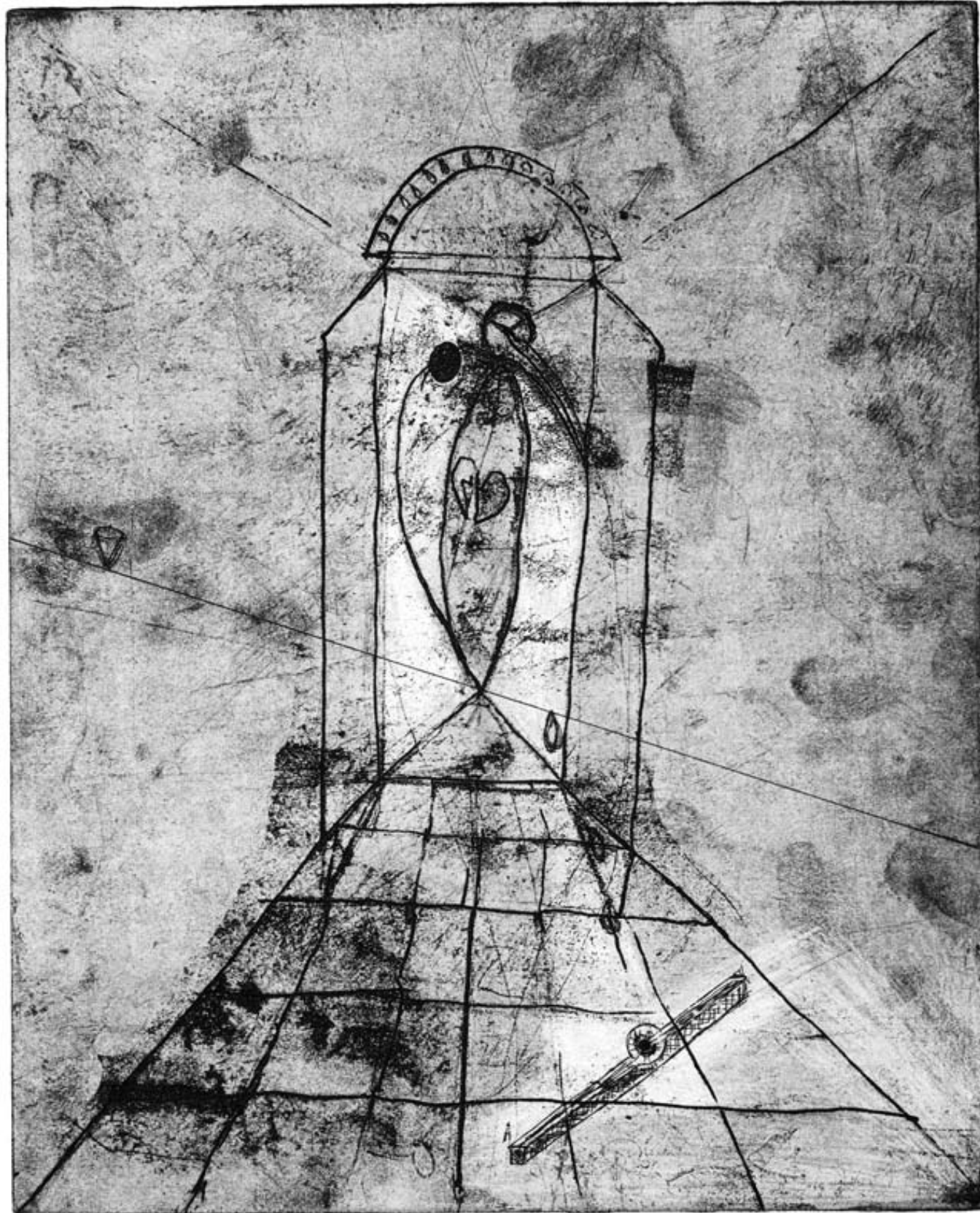
## RE:FORM — A MODEL

HANNA FARAH - KUFR BIR'IM

Text: Norma Musih

From the Hebrew: Charles Kamen





The Middle, 2006

Hanna Farah builds Bir'im, the village where his father and grandfather were born, but where he never lived. He reconstructs it in his own name, imprints it in his identity card, and erects it on ruins using models, etchings, various acts, videos, and photographs. From all these he spins a new village, which exists simultaneously as fragmented memories and dreams, and as a detailed, practical proposal for return. Farah's action joins a long sequence of communal, private, artistic, and legal projects undertaken by the people of Kufr Bir'im as part of their struggle against the obliteration of the village and for their return home.

Bir'im's refugees are scattered. Some live as internal refugees within Israel – in the neighboring village of al Jish, in Haifa, Acre, Nazareth, Tel Aviv, and Jaffa; some live in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world. A church and a cemetery both still in use remain on Kufr Bir'im's land, as well as some remnants of other buildings. The regime declared this part of the village where archaeological excavations were carried out to be a closed military zone and national park<sup>1</sup>: The park is intertwined with the military area, and access is unrestricted. The national park covers the remains of Kufr Bir'im emerging beneath the trees which spread over the village. Thus did the state doubly plunder the homes from their owners: First when it expelled them, and again when it refused to allow them to return. The prohibition of their return was based on the claim that the place was a closed military area – the Israeli regime's national park. Defining a place as a "closed military area" became a strategy which has served the state since 1948 as one way to affirm its control of territory. In this case, defining the site as a "closed military area" was intended to mark not the physical danger to those who approached the place – since it is also a national park – but rather the danger to the regime were it to allow entry, permit the village's refugees to return.

Kufr Bir'im was captured on November 29, 1948, as part of "Operation Hiram" and its destruction has



Distorted 9, 2007





Hosting Guests, 2003

continued since. In 1949, after the village was occupied, systematic looting of the inhabitants' property was carried out, including the stones from which their dwellings were built. In 1953, the military bombed the village from the air, even though – or perhaps because – the Supreme Court decided in July 1952, that there was no reason to prevent the villagers from returning. The destruction continued in 1965 with the renewal of excavations which had first been conducted by German archaeologists at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1972, after repeated attempts by residents of the village to return, Moshe Dayan, then Minister of Defense, declared Kufr Bir'im and 'Iqrit (the adjoining village) to be closed military areas, and in 1977 the Israeli government established a national park on Kufr Bir'im and the surrounding area. In 2000, additional buildings on the outskirts of the village were destroyed during infrastructure work on the road to Sasa Junction.

Until 1948, the residents of Kufr Bir'im made their living from agriculture. The village lands were divided into small and medium-sized plots on which the villagers grew figs, olives, grain and tobacco, primarily for local use. The village engaged in commerce with Sidon and Tyre in Lebanon, with Haifa and Safad in Palestine and with the neighboring villages of Sasa, Farah, Ras al-Ahmar, and al-Jish. Until 1948, some of the villagers were employed by the Mandatory government. According to British records, the total area of Kufr Bir'im was 12,250 dunams (3,060 acres). It was divided into two main sections, eastern and western, with the Church of the Virgin in the middle. The village had two schools: a public, government-run school, established during the British Mandate, and a parochial school.<sup>2</sup> One of the rooms in the home of Farah's grandfather, adjoining the family home but with a separate entrance, was rented to the school and used as a classroom. Farah's father had been born in that room, and his father's grandmother had died there.



Rainy Day, 2003

The room functions as a type of vanishing point in Farah's work, from which he departs and where he returns. The room and the village thus form two major axes of his work: the room is the unique detail, a part of his home, a private space – but at the same time, it is also a part of the village, a remnant which has remained open, unprotected. The village is the second, outer circle, surrounding the room, containing it and contained by it. The room is the place to which Farah returns time and again in order to act.

Hanna Farah- Kufr Bir'im enters his room and breathes life into it: on one occasion he fills it with red tubs which catch the rainwater, on another occasion he grows anemones in it, and on yet another – he covers its windows with sugar cubes. Farah invites others,





8.10.1949

friends and relatives, to take part in his actions, to join him in animating the room and, thereby, the village. To animate them twofold: by introducing human life to the room, and in the way that the room itself comes to life, becomes animated, generating its own evolution. These actions are akin to a work in progress, an ongoing project that has spanned seven years and still continues.<sup>3</sup> Since the village is controlled by the army and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, the erection of permanent residential structures is prohibited. Each action, therefore, lasts only 24 hours, during which

the infrastructure is laid and the act is carried out, at whose conclusion the room returns to its former state, a voided, ostensibly empty room. But the actions do not disappear: they leave traces in the next act, continue to evolve, live on even after ending, like a living tissue capable of healing itself and growing new organs.

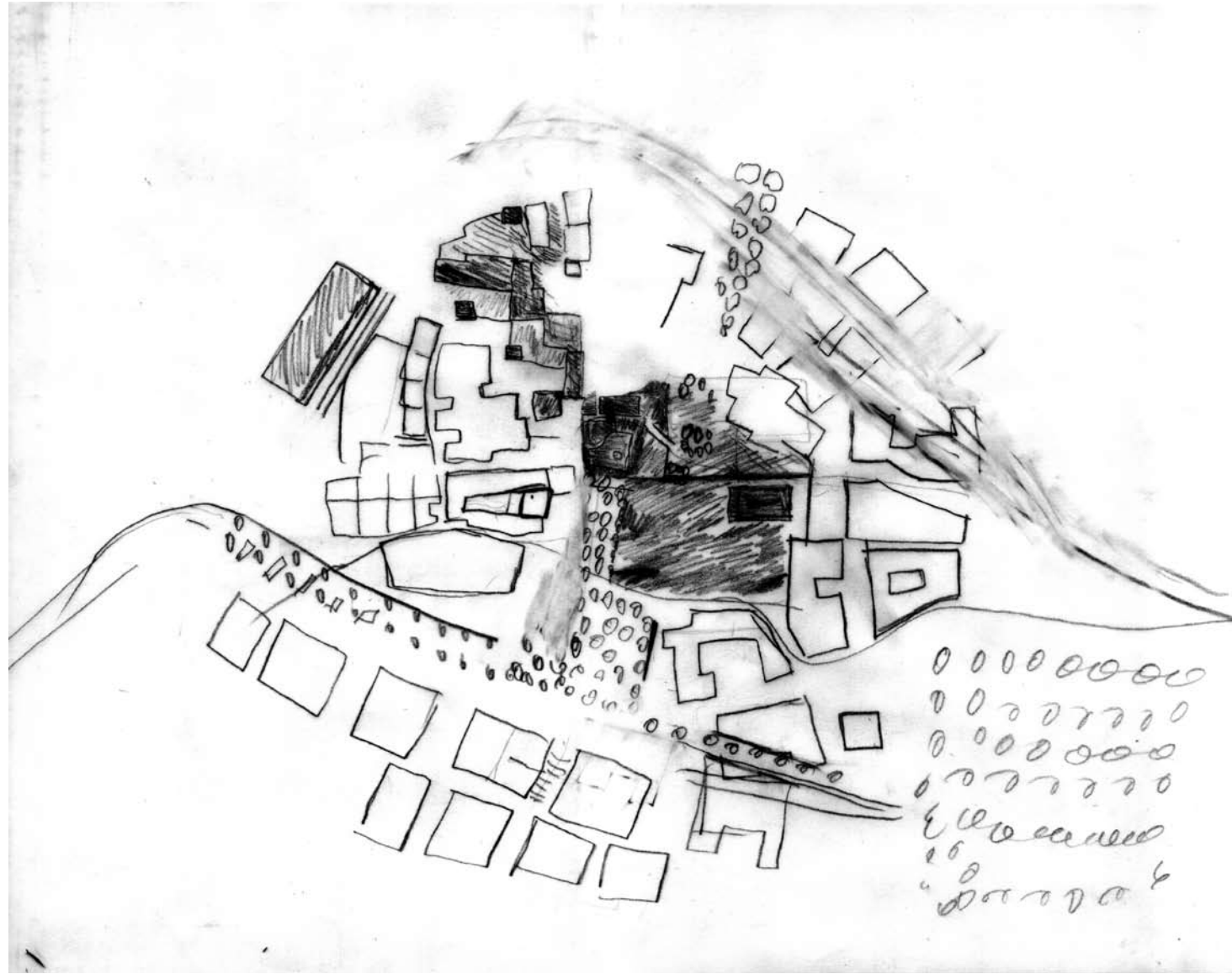
The first phase in Farah's work is mapping. He examines British and Israeli aerial photographs, but instead of regarding them as military maps showing access routes, firing positions, and retreat routes,<sup>4</sup> he analyzes them, extracting the village's movement and its



9.1956

possible continuation. Farah does not adopt the military perspective of the photographer who documented the village for British or Israeli intelligence, but rather declares: "I see life in the photograph, I see the life that existed and the life that can be." Farah's analysis negotiates with the aerial, military view. Instead of using the photographs as an instrument of control, he employs them as a tool for reflection and construction, imprinting them with a civil reading.

Using aerial photographs, testimonies, memories, and detailed observation of what remains, Farah reconstructs the structure of the village, which grew from a crowded nucleus of houses. Family and community life in the village developed organically, usually around shared courtyards. Plots of land owned by the inhabitants were scattered at various distances around the outskirts of the village. The model conceived by Farah for the village's future development restores

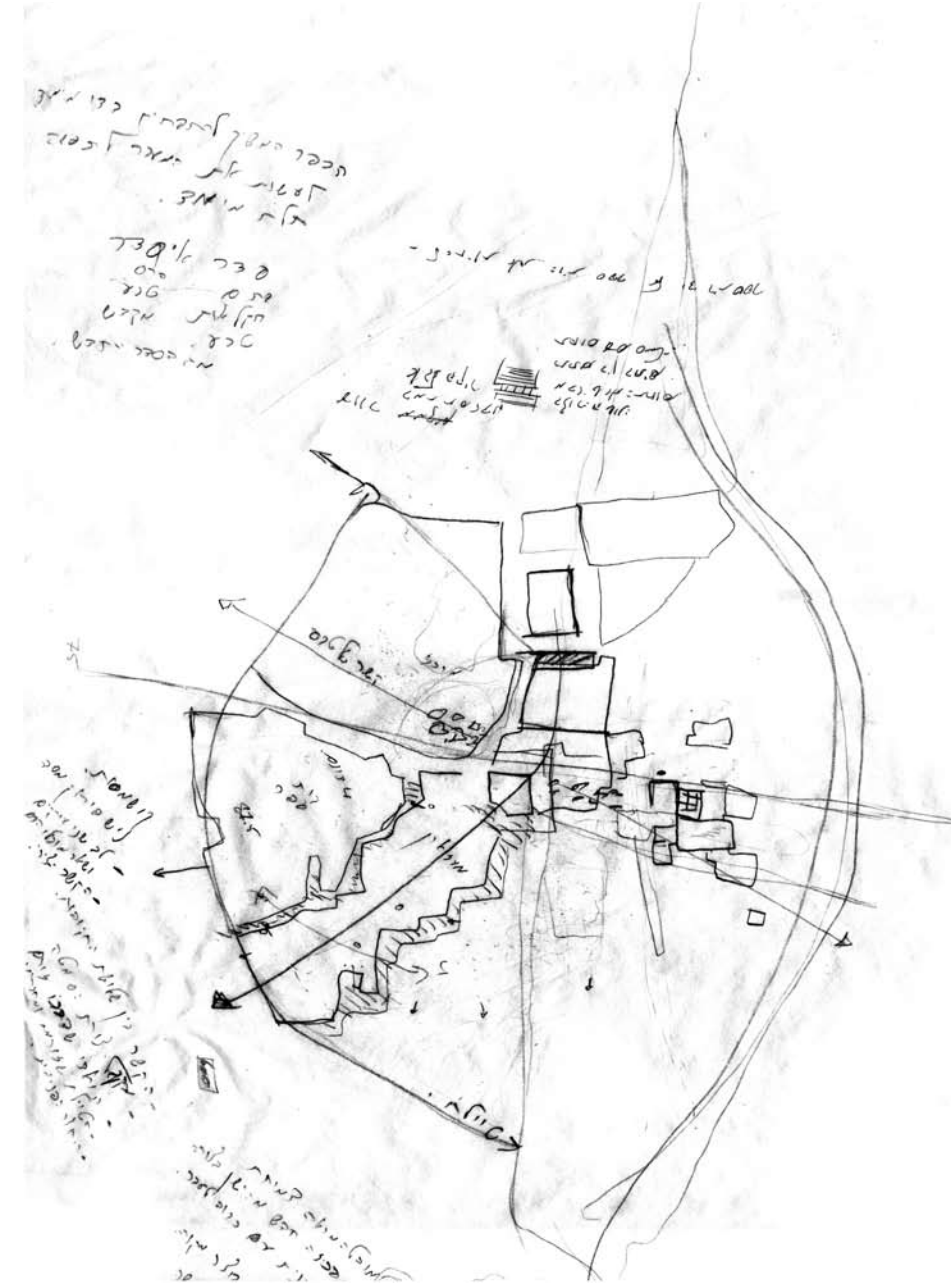


Study for Village V, 2001

the original relationship between the built-up and agricultural areas, situating the planned residential area in the historic village center, so that the new buildings repeat the circular layout, rounding out the village that once existed. Farah's study of new construction in the neighboring village of al-Jish helped him infer the current needs of families who are building in the area, and thus he leaves vacant areas around the new residential construction. His model places agricultural land and industrial structures in the second and third

circles around the inner residential area.

Farah's model incorporates the remains of the old village within and as an integral part of the new one. His work reconstructs not the village, but its layout. He does not preserve the existing remains as such, but rather sprouts new structures from them. Farah proposes locating the new village's communal and cultural center in the historic village core, the site holding the memories of those who once lived there and became refugees. Refugeeism will be present as part of



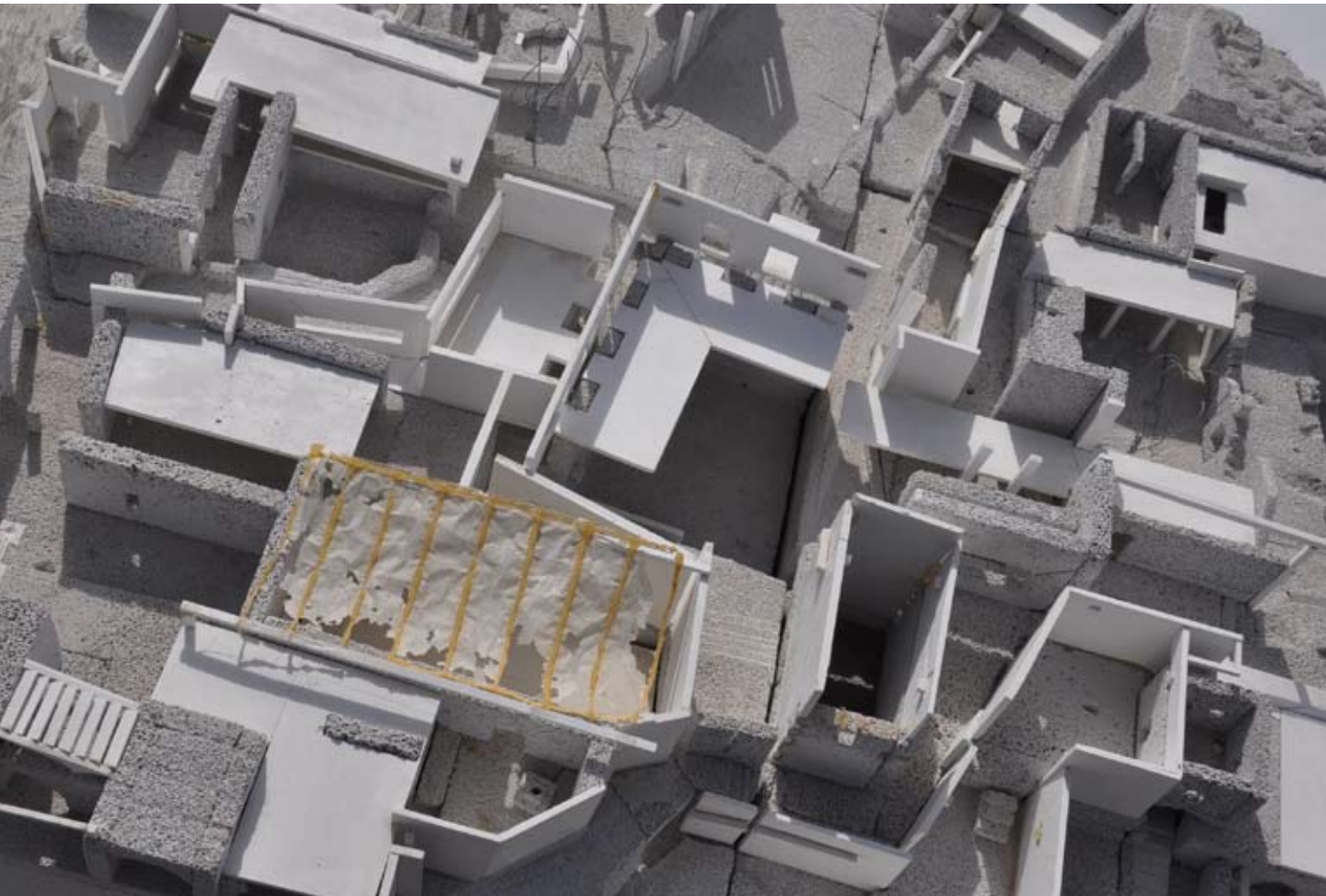
Study for Village 3, 2001

the identity of the place, but, rather than dominating, it will become a part of its daily life. Farah, then, does not perform an act of conservation/reconstruction; he builds something new from the memory of the place. He creates the conditions that make creation and a new life possible.

According to Farah's plan, one of the buildings in

the village center will serve as a diwan, where members of the community meet to hold family and communal events such as weddings, lectures or funerals; other areas will be used for the municipal center, library, school, artist studios, café, history museum, art gallery, movie theater, etc. Instead of a monument, the remains of the old village will become the nucleus of





Re:form - a model, 2010

the renewing village and a center for new creation.

While most of Farah's planning efforts focus on construction of the village nucleus as a cultural center, such plan cannot be implemented without considering the surroundings. Farah cannot restrict himself to rebuilding the communal center. There must also be houses for people to live in – even if these appear as mere preliminary sketches, as a model which must be fleshed out. The communal and cultural center cannot be created without building homes for every family. Communal life is possible only after the basic needs – a home, security – are met.

In the model, Farah does not return to the village as it existed before 1948, but rather addresses the

possibility that the village could become part of the place from which it was uprooted. Farah strives to observe and understand the place. He wants to develop the possibility for those who became refugees to return to it, and for those living there today – men and women from Kibbutz Bar'am and Moshav Dovev – to become part of it. The village which has become a symbol becomes concrete, the return becomes possible, because Farah is planning real life in it.

In order to build the cultural center which will serve the village community and the neighboring villages and localities – Kibbutz Bar'am, Moshav Dovev, Kibbutz Sasa, Kufr Jish, Kufr Sasa, Kufr Farah, Kufr Ras al-Ahmar, and other nearby localities – landowners will



Re:form - a model, 2010

have to relinquish their private property in the village center for the common good, as well as their dream for the old family home. Farah proposes that the original home be exchanged for one in the second circle surrounding the village center. He builds these houses on plots of equal size – land that has been redivided. Some of those lands had previously been masha' (مشاع) – communal village land.<sup>5</sup> These lands belonged to the entire village populace, which used them according to their different needs; in the case of Bir'im—for grazing.

The concept of masha' in the language and culture of the Kufr Bir'im residents possibly allows Farah to assume that they may be willing to give up their former homes in order to create an appropriate, respectable and respecting, shared space.

The existence of such a space should not be taken for granted. Refugees living in refugee camps in Lebanon, for example, are forced to grab temporary, crowded, improvised communal spaces in the overpopulated camp, even in the absence of communal spaces. The



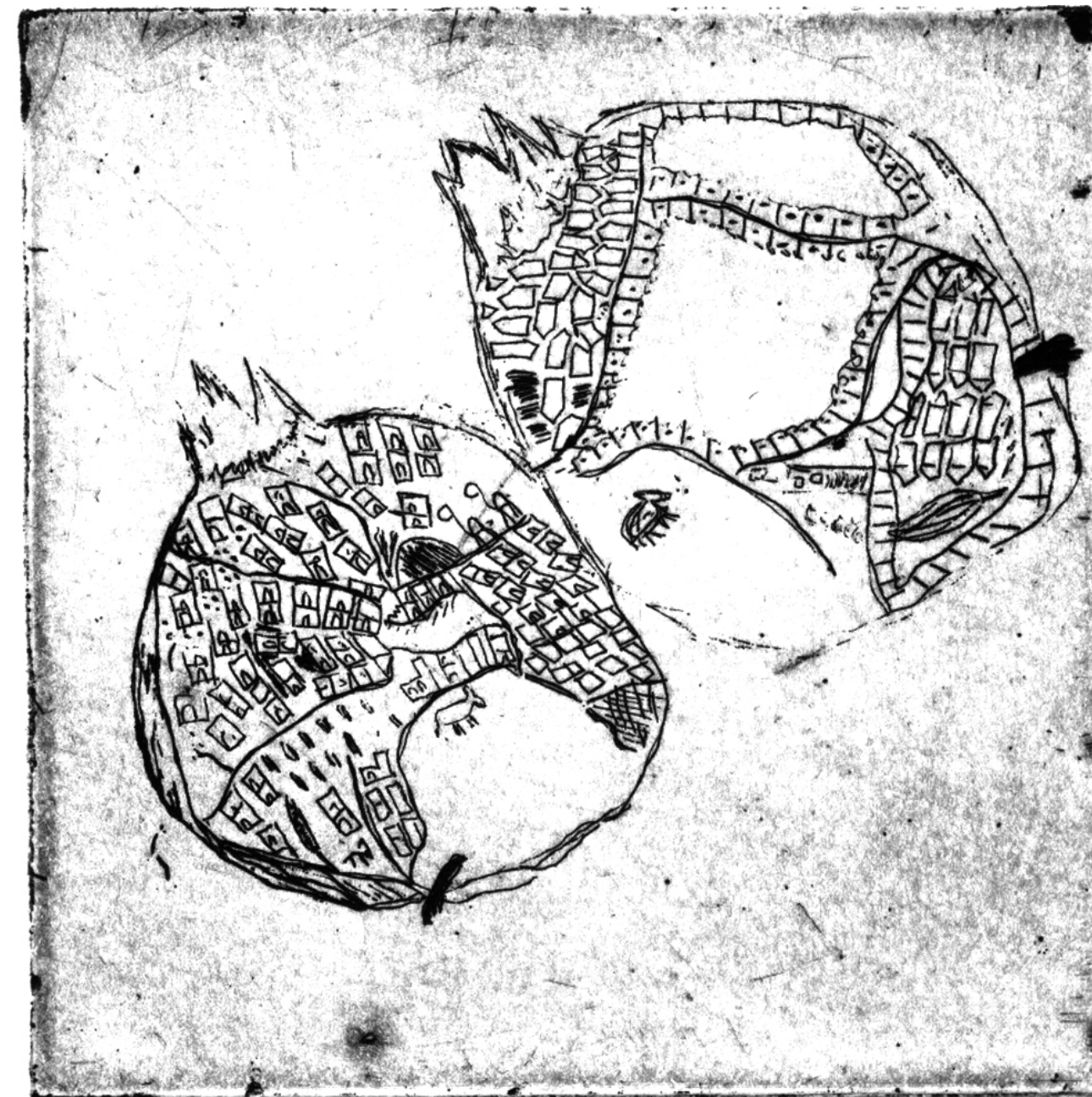
denial of shared space also denies the possibility of political civic life, for which the Palestinian refugees have been forced to struggle daily for more than sixty years. In those spaces which the refugees manage to create for themselves in the camps, despite everything, they negotiate among themselves and with the authorities. Thus they realize a political space that remained defective, incomplete, since in some of the countries where they live today the Palestinian refugees have not been granted citizenship, and in others their citizenship is partial or flawed.

In the case of Bir'im, like that of other villages whose refugees are scattered throughout the world, the communal spaces created are inadequate to contain all 6,000 of the villagers' descendants. Those who do succeed in coming together in the village sustain, among other things, a shared space in a community ceremony held once a year in the churchyard – at Easter, the feast of the resurrection. After prayer the villagers come down from the church one after the other. The first to leave are those who lost a family member during the past year. The first one to descend stands in the churchyard; the second shakes his hand and stands beside him. One by one the men and women of the village come down, shake hands and stand next to each other in circles of reciprocal greetings.

In his design for the reconstruction of the village and its cultural center, Farah not only returns the village residents to where they belong; he also creates for them, for himself, the conditions that will make a communal space possible, a political space in and from within the village. In order to create a commons, an actual space is required, one that is stable, permanent, secure: A public space which will make public communal life, community-existence, possible – existence denied the refugees during their years of exile. The actions launched by Farah in room in the village repeatedly complement the model, breathe life into it. They can be seen as a continuation of the

traditional handshaking ceremony as well as a glimpse of what may develop in the village center in the future – as a center of culture and hospitality catering to the local residents, neighbors, and guests. It would be a communal space of political action in which refugees who decided not to return permanently to the village could also play a role.

Utopia is a form of concretization that requires detailed planning.<sup>6</sup> It is not an abstract idea which cannot be implemented, but a description of a specific place in which lives are lived fully. Utopia appears in opposition to, or in defiance of, existing conditions and possibilities, therefore it is considered an "illusion." Farah's work combines the practical with the utopian. Both of these require detailed planning. Designing a village for stateless people who do not even have citizenship, and are unable to even come to the place, may be deemed an insane act, or at least one completely disconnected from political reality. Nevertheless, Farah's proposal represents a concrete option not only for the construction of a village, but also for an alternative political settlement, one in which refugees return to the places from which they were expelled or to other locations of their choice. Farah assumes the return of the refugees as a given, something that goes without saying; he uses it as the starting point for his planning Utopian thinking, due to the concreteness it requires, can avoid the trap set by the fear of the refugees' return. Farah's model describes the place to which Bir'im's refugees will return, where they will live, next to whom, and what possibilities will be open for the residents of the entire area. Farah's Re:Form model offers an opportunity to solve the refugee problem and establish a different form of citizenship, one which marks not only the relation to the nation-state, but also the relation to the way in which people share the common space lying between them.



Hab AlRuman, 2009

1 Noga Kadman, *On the Side of the Road and in the Margins of Consciousness: The Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948 in the Israeli Discourse* (Jerusalem: November, 2008) [Hebrew].  
 2 *Returning to Kufr Biri'm* (Badil Resource Center, 2006).  
 3 The acts are a joint project of Farah and artist Hila Lulu Lin.  
 4 Ariella Azoulay, *Constituent Violence 1947-1950: A visual genealogy of*

a regime and the transformation of the catastrophe into "a catastrophe from their point of view" (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009) [Hebrew]; see also: <http://www.zochrot.org/images/violenc%20galerry%202009%20english%5D.pdf> (English translation: Charles S. Kamen).  
 5 In contrast to mafrouz – privately owned land.  
 6 I would like to thank Liat Brix Etgar for this insight.



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**Board:** Ofer Kahana, Osnat Bar-Or, Ayyub Aamer, Norma Musih,  
Eitan Bronstein, Tomer Gardi, Umar Alghubari

**Editor:** Tomer Gardi

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**Model development and production:** Hanna Farah-Kufr Bir'im, Tamir Hadadi, Wesam Akel, Hila Lulu Lin

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**Actions:** Hanna Farah-Kufr Bir'im, Hila Lulu Lin

**Coordination and production of the actions:** Wesam Akel, Hanna Farah-Kufr Bir'im, Hila Lulu Lin