

# **The Finnish Urban Studies Conference 2026 – Session 21**

## **Planning the City of Tomorrow in a Liberated Palestine**

### **Liberation as Process: Rehearsing Freedom Through Space and Activity**

**Mai Rizeq Al Zeer**

#### **Abstract**

Discourses on Palestine are frequently structured by a persistent temporal dichotomy: the present is cast as dystopian, while liberation is deferred to a projected utopia. This paper unsettles that binary by reframing the question from “What should a liberated Palestine look like?” to “How might planning practices actively cultivate liberating conditions?” Central to this shift is what I call “Occu-topia” which describes a double consciousness produced by the occupation: where lived realities are anchored in constraint and collective aspirations displaced into an idealized future. Such a dichotomous imagination, I argue risks normalizing passivity, deferral, and a diminished sense of spatial agency.

Rather than utopian liberation or dystopian under occupation projections, I turn to the present; the gray “occu-topian” zone between these poles as a generative site of praxis. Liberation is approached not as an end-state but as an ongoing process that can be rehearsed through the reciprocal relation between space and activity/incident. Designed environments, together with the events and practices they enable, are examined as tools capable of reconfiguring perception, restoring agency, and decolonizing everyday experiences of autonomy, dignity, and collective presence.

Extending this framework, in my master's theses I argued that Palestinian universities project scaled-down urban layers in which social, political, (de)colonial spatial dynamics are intensified. By tracing parallel categories of incidents across campus and city, the paper proposes a reversal methodology: decolonizing campus planning as a prototypical laboratory for rethinking urban futures. In doing so, it advances a model of liberation-oriented planning grounded in temporality, event-space relations, and present-tense spatial practice where planning becomes not merely a representation of freedom, but a lived and iterative enactment of it.

Mind liberation through spatial practice precedes physical liberation.

# **Unlearning Planning: Indigenous Approaches to Land and Urbanism in Palestine**

**Anwar Samara**

## **Abstract**

This paper calls for a critical rethinking of dominant planning paradigms through the lens of indigenous spatial practices in Palestine. Planning systems imposed under conditions of occupation have restructured land into fragmented, controlled, and often extractive environments, disrupting long-standing relationships between communities and their landscapes. In this context, the act of “unlearning planning” becomes essential to envision alternative urban futures.

The research explores how indigenous approaches rooted in vernacular knowledge, ecological awareness, and lived spatial practices offer fundamentally different ways of understanding and shaping the built environment. Rather than treating land as a passive surface for development, these practices engage it as a dynamic and relational system, where social, environmental, and cultural processes are deeply intertwined.

Using Al-Walaja as a case study, the paper examines how local spatial logics such as terracing, adaptive reuse of materials, and landscape-based organization can inform contemporary design strategies. It highlights how these practices operate through minimal intervention, continuity, and respect for existing conditions, contrasting sharply with top-down planning models.

The paper positions indigenous knowledge not as a nostalgic reference, but as an active and evolving framework for future urbanism in Palestine. It argues that unlearning imposed planning systems is a necessary step toward reclaiming land, restoring spatial agency, and developing context-sensitive approaches to urban design.

By foregrounding indigenous practices, the research contributes to broader debates on decolonial urbanism and proposes a shift toward planning methods that are grounded in place, ecology, and cultural identity.

# **From Measuring Impact to Collective Action: Placemaking as Prefigurative Planning in a Colonial Context**

**Tharaa Kirresh**

## **Abstract**

What forms of planning can emerge in contexts where urban space is shaped by imposed regimes that restrict local agency over land, infrastructure, and decision-making? Drawing on research and practice in Jerusalem, this paper examines placemaking not as a technical intervention, but as a situated response to structural constraints that limit the role of Palestinian planners and communities in shaping their urban environments.

The paper builds on an empirical inquiry into the social impact of placemaking interventions, which revealed a critical gap between increased feelings of safety and limited sense of belonging. Rather than interpreting this as a failure of intervention, the paper argues that this gap reflects deeper structural conditions that exclude local communities from decision-making over public space.

In response, the paper traces a shift from evaluating impact to engaging in collective practice, through the development of the Placemaking Palestinians Network as a platform for shared learning, professional exchange, and coordinated action. While such practices do not dismantle structural constraints, they generate alternative modes of spatial engagement and collective agency.

The paper argues that these practices can be understood as prefigurative forms of planning, offering grounded insights for imagining post-liberation urban futures rooted in collective rights to land, space, and urban life.