

Playing with sand in a sandstorm: Palestinians on Banksy's Walled Off Hotel

Banksy's Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem, Palestine, opened in March 2017

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Have you ever been asked out for coffee and after a few minutes of conversation realised that your acquaintance is not the least bit interested in what you are saying? Every time you try to communicate you hit a brick wall. It's confusing. Why ask me out if no conversation is forthcoming? Instead, you hear a solitary rant and feel that you are simply a mirror for your acquaintance's ego. This doesn't feel good.

Many Palestinians feel the same way about graffiti artist Banksy and his new project, the Walled Off Hotel. Marketed as "the hotel with the worst view in the world", it is located four metres from Israel's apartheid wall in Bethlehem. The intention is for the hotel to attract tourists to the occupied West Bank and educate them about both art and the conflict.

Attracting a new type of visitor to Palestine

Giulia Riva – blogger at blocal-travel.com —visited the Walled Off Hotel recently. She observes that Banksy's project gives a different kind of audience the chance to witness Palestinian life under Israeli occupation. In order to reach the hotel, people must pass through a military checkpoint, walk through the gate in the wall and witness the impotence of Palestinians and the abuse from Israeli soldiers.

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“For a visitor,” explains Guilia, “to go through all of this in person provides a deeper understanding and reflection about the conflict. And this is an integral part of the hotel’s experience.”

During her trip, she gathered mixed opinions about the controversial hotel. “I have spoken with Israelis who are enthusiastic about the project, and Palestinians happy to welcome more tourists to Bethlehem. This proves that we shouldn’t take Banksy’s work as a political statement, but rather as pure artwork that you can like or dislike, regardless of whether you are from Palestine or Israel.”

The gallery and museum within the hotel are both accessible to non-residents and those who simply cannot afford to stay there. The different exhibitions give the locals a good reason to stop by, she says. “While the gallery space exhibits local artists, the museum recounts the story of Palestine through art. For all these reasons, the Walled Off Hotel is not just another luxury hotel, but a multifaceted art project.”

Bethlehem, Guilia tells me, was a destination for street art lovers already, as many artists have left their mark on the wall, including Banksy. The opening of the Walled Off Hotel, she believes, will give a boost to the local economy.

She doesn’t think that Banksy conceived the hotel as a business, as he said on the website that the aim was simply to break even. For her, there is nothing wrong with using his name to draw attention to important issues. “This is something that Banksy can do very well, and the ‘marketing’ side is an integral part of his art.” After all, she points out, many NGOs try to get celebrities to provide testimonials, or act as ambassadors. “As such, I do not think that Banksy is ‘using’ the conflict between Israel and Palestine to talk about himself.”



Banksy's Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem opened in March 2017 [Naima Morelli/Middle East Monitor]

Postmodernist detachment is not the way to go

Palestinian graffiti artist Hamza sees the matter very differently. “Building a hotel to show the apartheid wall is like establishing a hotel next to Auschwitz concentration camp during World War Two,” he argues passionately. When he first heard about the Walled Off Hotel, his immediate thought was that Banksy was trying to capitalise on the suffering of the Palestinians. “Not for fame, you understand — he doesn’t need it — but as a way to ‘be there’.”

Although he has come across opinions like Guilia’s among his friends, he notes that they were all artists, filmmakers and those with what he



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calls “intellectual” backgrounds. “They think that the hotel highlights the apartheid and puts it into focus. However, for me it is clear that Banksy is talking about the struggle without taking sides, so it’s like playing with the sand in a sandstorm.”

This detached postmodernist view of the issue is what Hamza is more critical about. “He’s looking at the struggle — not the conflict — as if it was a small misunderstanding between two neighbours, which is not true.” Most of the artworks are just playing around and lack radicality, he insists. “Sure, irony might urge the visitor to think, but as I see it the hotel is just another artwork by a celebrity.”

Equating the victim and the executioner

Social worker Shatha Safi lives in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. Since she was very young, she has been interested in all forms of art, from fine art to ceramics. She has always been a fan of Banksy, especially his graffiti on the separation wall. However, when she first heard about the Walled Off Hotel, her first reaction was surprise. “I didn’t know really what to think about it, because this time it is not simply street art, it is an actual hotel containing Banksy’s art, so it is more like a business thing, benefitting not the local economy at large, but only the few business men who were involved in the project.”

While she deems Banksy to be a great artist who certainly doesn’t need additional fame and money, she suspects that his interest in building the hotel derives from wanting to remain constantly in the frame himself.

“There are two types of Palestinians who are pro-Banksy: one is the artist and the other is the businessman.” The artist, Shatha tells me, thinks that Banksy’s art is important and represents a great expression of our struggle and hopes to get in touch with him and his work in the future. “The businessman in Palestine, however, cares more about the commercial and tourism aspects which will grow from the Walled Off Hotel.”

In response to the criticism that the works within the hotel focus on the violence, rather than moving towards hope, she suggests that people may not care about Banksy’s art much if he shows hope. “The conflict is stronger than hope,” she adds.

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This underlying ethos comes through in the work being exhibited in the hotel. Although Banksy tries to show sympathy for the Palestinians, it is clear that he believes the Palestinian to be just as violent as the Israeli soldier. For this reason, many of the artwork in the hotel failed to impress Shatha the Banksy fan. “They show the two sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ‘equating between the victim and the executioner,’” she explained.



Banksy's Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem opened in March 2017 [Naima Morelli/Middle East Monitor]

Shatha Safi thinks that his kind of art – heavily ironic – needs an audience which is well-informed on the issue and able to understand and analyse contemporary art. For this reason she doesn't think the Walled Off Hotel will have a big impact.

Moving beyond the representation of the struggle

Marck Emaya studies art from Palestine, and was introduced to art through graffiti. He is quite hard on Banksy, whom he believes is a sell-out. "My opinion on his work in general is that he steals his style from French artist Blek Le Rat, and follows the hot topics in the newspapers." According to Emaya, Banksy basically searches for spotlights to stand in and creates provocative images to shock the viewer. "And this," he insists, "is a cheap way to get fame."

When he first heard about the Walled Off Hotel, Marck thought it was just another artist wanting to make money from the Palestinian struggle. His visit to the hotel confirmed this view. "It is obvious that the hotel is made for nothing more than business and targets tourists, not the Palestinians. Why would any Palestinian go to a hotel which shows something we witness every day?"

It is ironic, he points out, that Banksy's work preaches a 'revolutionary ideology' but is being showcased in a hotel which is a capitalist activity meant to make money. "It is like putting portraits of Lenin and Marx in a bank. It doesn't work that way."

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The art work on display in the hotel does nothing but reiterate a well-known picture of Palestine, only in "Banksy style". Furthermore, as Hamza and Shatha note, he misrepresents the actors in the conflict, presenting a superficial take on the issue; Marck agrees.

"I really think that people have to see the situation in Palestine in its true colours," he insists, "and realise that the problem here isn't about an inherent conflict between religions or groups of people. It would need some deep look at the history, realising that Jews were a part of Palestinian society and Zionism stopped that." Marck's suggestion for Banksy is to stop looking at the issue from the outside, and produce work about the everyday life of the population instead. "I'm not saying that the Palestinians don't struggle with the occupation any more, but rather that there is a lot more to Palestinian life that no one ever talks or knows about." He points out that the struggle of the Palestinians with the occupation is something that has been represented over and over again in the past fifty years. "So representing that once more

won't help unless an artist has something new to say, which I really doubt is possible."

Art needs to be more human

The Walled Off Hotel is a minor event in both the art world and the Palestinian narrative; just as having a coffee with someone who needs to unleash an ego is a forgettable experience. However, Banksy's hotel provides us with the opportunity to reflect on the role of art in sensitive contexts, such as the situation in occupied Palestine.

What art needs is not to be more witty or ironic. It should neither become didactic nor necessarily take sides. Artists need to have a heart and some empathy; a capacity and willingness to listen. In order to do that, though, they need to break out from the cage that is their own narcissism. This won't make the art necessarily cooler, but it would make it more meaningful. More human, in fact.



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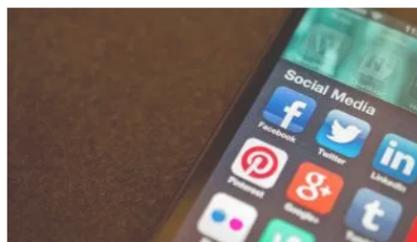
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