



# The Accursed Thing



The team of the el-Atlal project believes that the future of Palestine is in Jericho. el-Atlal is a projected international residency in Jericho for artists, writers, and academics. After a successful launch in Paris, the project is now ready to be implemented in Jericho itself in the form of a festival that will take place at the end of October 2015. el-Atlal hopes to boost the city and to create a cultural hub in one of the most intriguing cities of Palestine.

By Karim Kattan



“A

nd ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed.” Joshua 6:18 1.

Jericho is not that much of a biblical city. It stands, lonely, in the margins of the Bible. It is near Jerusalem but not Jerusalem. In a land where every city has more Bible stories than one can ever remember, Jericho seems left out.

The prophet Elijah – one of the least likeable of the bunch, who famously summoned a bear to maul a group of children because they called him “baldhead” – purifies a spring during his stay in Jericho. This conveniently impresses everyone around him and explains why Jericho is a green oasis town in the barren desert of Judea. As for Jesus, he casually cures a couple of blind men, scolds a tax collector, and moseys on his way to Jerusalem.

Most famously, Jericho is the stage of one of the bloodiest wraths of God in the Old Testament: he orders Joshua and his army to destroy

the city and kill everything that is within it. Jericho was the first battle of the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan. It is unclear, however – as is often the case with the Old Testament God – why Jericho had to be destroyed and its land cursed to eternal barrenness. One can surmise that Jericho was a place of pagan worship and thus had to be purified. Joshua curses anyone who tries to rebuild the city: “Cursed be the man before the Lord, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho: he shall lay the foundation thereof in his firstborn, and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it.”

God – careful accountant that he is – orders his men to take all the gold of the city for his own treasury, but to steer clear of the “accursed thing” that is in Jericho.

I am sure a Bible scholar would be able to precisely parse what the “accursed thing” is and how this



translation is inadequate. The King James translation of the Bible does not give any information and we are left to wonder – what were the dark secrets of the moon city, what was that “accursed thing” that so terrified the conquerors and destroyers?

2.

Entering Jericho, through the highway that is taken straight out of a road movie, one feels that one has entered a whole new world. Jericho does not look like Palestine. Rather, it looks like the fever dream of a nineteenth-century Orientalist.

There is no separation wall in Jericho, no old city like the ones in Jerusalem, Nablus, or Hebron. Palm trees and



tropical fruit orchards as far as the eye can see; relatively abundant sources of water, in a land where water is one of the most important geopolitical issues; a plateau, in a country known for its green hills and terraces.

The occupation itself is different here: it is a dematerialized process. That accursed thing is here, unseen yet present in every nook and cranny.

Still, one feels one has left Palestine behind upon entering the city. Effectively, Jericho is the gateway to the outside world as Palestinians leave the country over the Allenby Bridge that crosses over to Jordan.

As a city, Jericho is primordial: a crossroads between the north of Palestine and the south, and an interface between Palestine and the world. It is one of the few cities that still takes pride in its deeply pagan roots as an ancient capital of a region-wide moon cult.

Because it is so blatantly and proudly different from the rest of the country, Jericho may just turn out to be one of the most important cities for the future of Palestine.

3. el-Atlal is a projected international residency in Jericho for artists, writers, and academics. We chose Jericho because it is a city too often left out in Palestine; one that is frequently deemed merely good enough for weekend barbecues or pool parties. And when anyone comes to Jericho, it is to build houses that fail to take into account their surroundings or the people of Jericho – except to fetishize them.

For the past few years, interest in Jericho has been revived, and one can see the city thrive. We believe that Jericho will be the laboratory of what our nation can be and of what kinds of communities we are able or willing to create.

el-Atlal's first event will be a citywide festival that will take place on October 30 and 31. The festival will offer various activities such as art installations, performances, poetry readings, round-table discussions, concerts, and plays. It will be set out along a route within the city. The festival aims to create a dialogue with the citizens of Jericho

and the city itself. We want to welcome all the artists, writers, and performers to come and take advantage of the street festival.

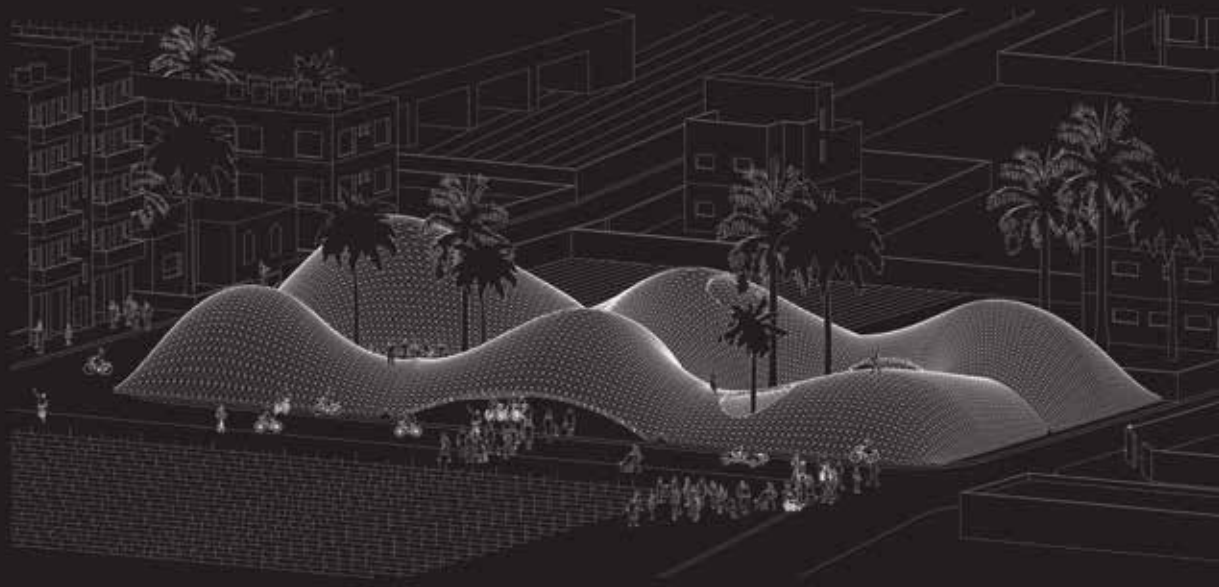
Another aim of the festival is to remind everyone of what Jericho – and Palestine in general – can offer: incredible potential and a wealth of wonder. Despite the curses – heaped over us, time and time again – and in spite of endeavors to destroy us, here we stand as the dreamers of the world. The accursed thing remains, lurking in our darkness, in Jericho and elsewhere in our land. That's no matter: we resist and we build and we try. And here, in the oasis of the moon, tucked away in its lush gardens, the dreamers can dream new, better worlds.

*Karim Kattan is a French-Palestinian PhD student in comparative literature. He founded el-Atlal in the summer of 2014 and lives between France and Palestine. The el-Atlal team can be reached through [www.el-atlal.com](http://www.el-atlal.com).*

## Our Readers Say ...

*Art is a mix of creativity, imagination, skills, and expressions, and it can be a communication tool for cultural as well as emotional expression. When it comes to the question about losing our culture, we sometimes subconsciously give up something without even feeling that we are doing so. For example, because of the geographic separation, some villages have been erased from the Palestinian-Israeli map. (Erased means that the name of the village has been changed and that the people living in it are both Israelis and Palestinians.) This separation has caused changes in many cultural features as well as customs, but I believe that our culture still exists inside us. We know the real names of our villages; we are still faithful to the cultural traditions in our daily lives; we still dance the dabka at weddings; we still listen to and read the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish that talks of our land; some village brides still wear the Palestinian thobe. I feel that as strong and powerful as such an occupation can be, we are stronger in our commitment and belief in our traditions and culture.*

*Sarah Masri, Ramallah*



Bird's eye view of project in context. Project by Scales, research department of AAU ANASTAS.