Fields of the Future
A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center
Episode 2: Samia Henni—Relearning Architecture, Exhibiting, and Teaching
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Transcript

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future. In this episode Nina Stritlzer-Levine speaks with historian, theorist, and exhibitor Samia Henni about architectural history, Algeria in the aftermath of French colonial rule, the crucial role of the archive, and exhibition making as activism.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: I'm Nina Stritzler-Levine, former Director of Bard Graduate Center Gallery and newly appointed professor, curatorial practice and director of our focus project exhibitions at the Bard Graduate Center. Today it is my great pleasure to speak with Samia Henni, assistant professor, Cornell University School of Architecture, Art, and Planning. I want to begin by stating that myself and this community stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Professionally, as a member of our faculty, as a white woman, I pledge to engage in my own self-examination and introspection about my actions and to work to eradicate systemic racism. I've been asked to ask Samia a question that is in a way required but being asked of all of the participants in our podcasts. And that is, what is your relationship to objects?

Samia Henni: Thank you so much for having me. It's really a pleasure to be here and to speak with you. I think I identify or I consider objects as carriers of histories. And I try to really understand the multiplicity of those histories through not only the aspects of those objects, but specifically through what is not visible on those objects.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: Samia, that is really a fascinating answer. And an answer that is absolutely relevant to the mission of the Bard Graduate Center. Because we discuss in our community that objects are the carriers of stories. Can you tell us in your own voice and through your own thinking, who is Samia Henni? You come from Algeria, you studied in Switzerland, and you've been teaching in the United States. I'm hoping that you can tell us about your decision to study architectural history. Why you did that in Zurich. What obstacles if any did you overcome.

Samia Henni: Who am I? I'm an eternal student. I'd say my real interest is to learn. Learn more, more and more. I selected the ETH in Zurich, specifically the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture to do my PhD in history and theory of architecture, because there was a new doctorate school that was being opened by professor Philip Ursprung and others. The school was being established at the time. And I thought this is really a good time to test some of my ideas since the ETH is not, or at least the Institute, The Goethe-Institut and the ETH is not really known for its colonial, anti-colonial, post-colonial, let's say, history. So I was really interested to dig into those histories in a place that was not shaped by others, but in a place where people were really open to understand more and to enable and empower students, PhD students, to

pursue their own research. And I really needed some freedom to test some methodologies, I would even say. Because when you work on colonial histories, you can't use only the established methodologies to achieve or to understand how do we know.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: Can you just tell us what were those methodologies?

Samia Henni: Yeah. I must say it was a lot of learning by doing. I didn't, let's say, study a methodology and applied it. But I tried really to understand the subject matter. So it's really the intersection of military measures, colonial practices in architecture and urbanism. So we do have two categories, so military authorities and colonial authorities intersecting. So that was really something that I wanted to understand. The colonial archive and the military archive by definition are curated, are orchestrated. So I had to learn to read the archives against the grain. So to understand also all the bias that are embedded in that archive.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: Can you just say what the topic of the dissertation was?

Samia Henni: *Architecture of Counterrevolution: The French Army in Northern Algeria*. It was an attempt to understand how the colonial, and the military, and the French colonial and military authorities used the built environment to somehow obstruct or try to obstruct the revolution, try to control the population, and try to contain that revolution. We are talking about the Algerian Revolution. And it's a revolution that started in 1954 and ended in 1962, and it was against the French colonial rule that started in 1830. So it ended 132 years of French colonialism of Algeria. To go back to the methodology, given that the war ended in 1962, there were military officers and colonial administrators who were still alive, so I really wanted to discuss with them, talk to them, understand what they did, what was also not in the archive. And that's really... It's so clear, because I have to say it also embodies the untold histories or the histories that cannot be found in the archive. Since I am Algerian, I was born in Algeria, I grew up in Algeria. And every Algerian has a history, or stories or histories of that revolution in their families, in their collective, let's say, memory. In the stories and histories that our grandparents and parents keep telling us. Those narrative were of course not present in the archives, or in the witnesses and in the interviews that I conducted during that study. And I think what was really important is also to know that those people that I was interviewing, especially the military officers, most of them were right-wing officers, who... who still believe in their rights to colonize countries. Still believe in power that they have. And in the entitlement that they have to colonize people, and countries, and territories. So that was also a moment of learning, of understanding how do you not only know what you cannot know, but how do you also digest this knowledge and share it with others?

Nina Stritzler-Levine: Can I ask you, in your own quest and pursuit of knowing, did you think of going into fields other than architecture?

Samia Henni: I mean, I say that I am a historian of the projected, built, and destroyed environment. So, for me, architecture is not only about objects, is not only about buildings, but it can be about infrastructure, about walls, about the transformation of nature and the making

of environments, so I do think that architecture allows me to be hybrid or to move within different waters and to be in conversation with different, let's say interlocutors and discipline. As an anecdote, when I introduced myself or when I was in touch with military officers and I said, "Look, I'm really interested in architecture," they were like, "Yeah, we have nothing to say. We were officers in the field and we were not really caring about the built environment" and I was telling them, "I think this is what you think and I think that I see it differently, and please give me the chance to speak with you and we will see together that you did change the environment of the people."

Nina Stritzler-Levine: If you go online to Samia's website, you can find images that are directly relevant to what she's referring to in terms of the French presence in Algeria and their creation of an entire city complex in their own image. But Samia, just to say that you've said something really very important that perhaps what we're looking at in the future is no longer, if I can say, a department of art history, a department of architecture, but really rethinking what these departments are so that they can better reflect the kinds of research and inquiry that you're referring to. So on the Cornell website in the architecture school, you say that you teach "History of Architecture I: Empires and People," you teach "Gender, Architecture, Intersectionality," "Wars and Built Environments," and you teach a practicum, "Tell Me About Your Archive," and you call your specializations architectural history, architectural theory, conflicts, revolution, counterrevolution and wars, colonial histories, post-colonial and anti-colonial theories, and natural resources extraction and nuclear energy. Well, all of this already, as I've said, attest to teaching in the present while envisioning the future, so tell us about the construction of your courses. And it's really important, I think, also for our listeners, to understand what has been, it seems, at least on the surface, an acceptance of this rethinking.

Samia Henni: So first of all, what I really appreciate in the US, and I hope we will still have it, is the freedom of shaping our courses, is the freedom of proposing our own courses. So some of the classes that you mentioned are required classes, for example, *"History of Architecture I"* is a survey course, so the subtitle of it is "Empires and People" so, for me, one of the questions that I ask myself was, how do you introduce undergrad or grad students, first-year students, to the histories of the built environment, again, projected, built, and destroyed environment, in a way that is broader than the object. How do you also include the histories of people, people who built those built environments, but also people who live or had to live in those built environments, so to really understand the world through an imperial lens. "Tell Me About Your Archive," this is also a required class, this is for PhD students so it's a methodology class. For me, the question of the archive is crucial, and then archive is not only a document but is really an institution so, as Derrida says, "it's a commencement and a commandment." So you allow something to happen, but also, you initiate something and its opposite is also relevant, so if an archive does not exist, it doesn't mean that the histories of that subject matter do not exist.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: This is very interesting because I think, also, Foucault who thought of the archive as where discourse emerges.

Samia Henni: Exactly. Yes. “Tell Me About Your Archive” is also about discussing this question with many theorists or historians so that the students can be also exposed to this diversity and this sometimes competing visions or conflicting visions, as well, but that's also part of the challenge of doing the research. The “Gender, Architecture, Intersectionality,” “Wars and Built Environments,” I think, are also really important classes, they are really coming out of my first book. I dealt with the question of wars but also question of gender, women, intersectionality, it was also a, let's say, respect to the Me Too movement, as well.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: It's well-known now that this, can I say, lacuna, this absence of women in the history of architecture, the absence of women in the training of architects is increasingly being filled and there are many, many more women in the field now. And in one of the available YouTube lectures that you gave, I think it's at the GSD at Harvard, you talked about your response to the Women's March and the construction of a lecture on Islamic women and what I'm calling, we could use other words but let's just say the sartorial, the fashion restriction imposed on them. And you took the content of your book, in a sense, this issue of the plight of the Algerian people in relation to the French and political oppression, and created a story based on your research about Algerian women, can you say something about that?

Samia Henni: Yeah. Maybe as a comment, there are, yes, definitely more women in academia in the field of architecture but I would also love to see more women of color in leadership positions, I think this is still missing in our field. The lecture that you mentioned, I really wanted to understand the status of women, I wanted to understand how French white men portrayed Algerian women because women were for French white men... and this is really a general category, of course, now I'm talking about civil servants, I'm talking about military officers, I'm talking about the French institution and not the general public. So those men portrayed, represented women as Indigenous women as they were part of the Indigenous Code, Le Code de l'Indigénat, before the Second World War before 1945 and then, all of a sudden, because this code of Indigenous people were so unfair and extremely oppressive, they changed the terminology so, all of a sudden, Indigenous women were called Muslim women. And all women of Algeria... and there are many, many ethnic groups in Algeria... became, all of a sudden, Muslim women, so I wanted to understand how these representation of Algerian women developed and how the covering of the head was somehow instrumental and somehow used, again, as part of the civilizing mission. And this is, again, civilizing mission is a colonial construct which I refuse, of course, but it's just the legitimization or self-legitimization. But somehow, in that lecture, I really tried to show that Algerian women were asked to become French women, and also, French women for the French men were seen as one category, so it's a critique of that. It's also an analysis of the failure of this representation also because, by becoming French, the French men were asking these women to change the household, to change the interiors of the house that the French were building for them. So somehow there were all these unwritten texts that were part of this policy for the so-called Muslim women.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: So this is really important because, of course, we know that one of the most direct means of eliminating the presence of the other, or of difference, is by imposing a dress code. But I'd like to go back, very quickly, to your point about more women of color in

schools of architecture. I think this is a problem that goes to the very roots of the issues of oppression and segregation and our own educational system. And this, again, needs to be a complete rethinking, but what are your thoughts about that, just in terms of the attractiveness to women of color of the field of architecture?

Samia Henni: I think there are many people of color, women of color, that are doing an amazing amount of work, they have a unique voice, and I think we need to not only change, but really... I went to go to hear a group of Black colleagues at the GSAPP at Columbia University. They brought a manifesto, I call it a manifesto, maybe they call it a text, it's called *Unlearning Whiteness*, so they are really saying that the problem is not that there are not enough people of color, it's that those who are teaching and leading these institutions need to unlearn, need to go beyond their comfort zone, need to listen, need to really understand that the world can be, should be, must be, more equal and inclusive.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: Yes. Okay. So I'm, again, being conscious of time, and that's a good place just to put a momentary period on that question, but let's go on to something that's directly referential to the comment that you just made, which is the extraordinary way that you have addressed, both in your writing and curating and you don't use the word "curator" very much you use the word "exhibitor," but the way that you've gone about addressing issues of oppression and subjugation, both through the written word and spatially. Your first book, which comes from your dissertation, *Architecture of Counterrevolution: The French Army in Northern Algeria*, this book was published in 2017 and it has now been translated into French. And you have now, and I'm pretty sure this is the case, worked as an “exhibitor” on three main exhibitions, those are *Discreet Violence: Architecture and the French War in Algeria*, and now you have two current projects that are both in Marseille in conjunction with the larger exhibition, *Manifesta 13 Marseille*, and they are called *Housing Pharmacology* and the *Right To Housing*. Can you tell our listeners about Samia Henni as exhibitor, why you are especially invested in that word? And each of these projects, the book and the three exhibitions, are what I am calling exhibitions as activism. And why do you feel the exhibition is an important form of activism and what does it do to enunciate the political and social issues that you work on?

Samia Henni: Thank you so much. I think it's really crucial question and I really appreciate that. I think that being the professor, teaching in an elite school, it's very, for me, very limiting. You reach your audience, meaning your students, the faculty, and the academic, let's say world. I think what really interests me is to get out of the academic world and try to communicate these histories to a wider audience. So in the case of *Discrete Violence*, this is a taboo. It's the histories of French camps. I call them concentration camps. They were called by the French Centre de Regroupements Grouping Centers. So they were built during the Algerian revolution. So during that same revolution, the French authorities created the forbidden zones, they were large zones where the French army could not really access or have access to. So they displaced and evacuated those zones and displace really millions of Algerians into regrouping camps so concentration camps and they try to tell that story, which I have written about in let's say, academic journals, but also it's part of the book. In the exhibition, I tried to show or to work with documents, I'll do visual documents, so videos and photographs and [unknown]

documents that were produced by the French institutions. We have the French army, the French colonial authorities, but also I made interviews with those who are working now on those archives to comment on those photographs. I also interviewed people who were part of those operations, so they also share their memories. I also try to find private archives in order to de-propagandize those images, archives of... I call them private archives because they are really private photographs of an officer. He was really young at that time and he did his military service in Algeria and he was a cameraman and I had the chance to found him and I had the chance to discuss with him, to talk to him, to really convince him that his photographs are really really important and they should be part of the exhibition. So there is also all this mediation work, all these discussion conversations with many many people to convince them that, yes, it's really important to not only tell the story of the institution, but also tell the story of many other voices.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: Unfortunately I've seen these exhibitions through the filter of the internet. I haven't actually experienced them spatially, but to me, what you've done is something that, in fact, when we did our project on the couple, the Altos, I got permission to not frame drawings. I wanted to, in a sense de-muse-ify the content and what, you've done something that at least I've perceived when I look at these things through the internet, which is you've given a spatial dimension to the document, right? And this, I find really fascinating, that the documents, which you've researched, so in a sense, you bring the archive as discourse directly into the public domain and maybe this brings the exhibitor, the closest that you could possibly be to the professor, right? I'm curious to know how you go about this. So I'm calling this a combination of, I will use the word "curatorial thinking" and "design thinking." When you were going from conceptualization to realization, to think spatially, what did you do to get to that place?

Samia Henni: I think it's really, a very good way of framing it. I am designer also by training. So I did study architecture. I did work as an architect as well. I also imagined that people who would come to these spaces, they either don't know anything about the subject, or they know a lot about it, or they know a little bit about it, and they want to give them all the possible ways of reading these documents. And when I talk about documents, they are like textual, but also we have maps. We have photographs. I do not frame the photograph. I do not frame the documents. I really try to make them all very accessible and work with them. Even with the video, so I did not reproduce the videos that you can find in the archive, but I manipulated them, I created other documents out of them. So it's a yes about designing an experience and trying to really amplify and maximize the readings of those fragments that you see in the exhibition. In *Discreet Violence*, I also used the mirror. I also wanted to confront the visitor with their own image. This is not a history that is only far from us. I think it's a micro history, but it's a macro history because it talks about other places and other humans around the world. It's really a, let's say, paradigm. The concentration camp is not specific to that very history, but it's still happening today. So I think that kind of reflection was also very important. I also use newspaper articles of the time to include the voice of the media of the fifties and the right-wing, left, center, like all the media that were really portraying those camps and also the terminology that they were using. I think that was also a very important part of it, is to highlight

and to show and they did use really a highlight as physically with the pink highlighters, so I did highlight some of the parts that I found really relevant so that people can connect while they use, they visit the exhibition, they can connect some of these fragments as well. In *Housing Pharmacology* and also in the *Right to Housing*, again, the space where these histories are being told are really important, the histories of these spaces, but also how people can experience this exhibition. So in the *Housing Pharmacology*, the exhibition was supposed to be there before the pandemic was on the history of Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian workers who contributed to the glorious thirties. So these thirty years after the second world war in France, who contributed to the wealth. So that was a little bit the exhibition that the idea of the exhibition before the pandemic. But then when this pandemic happened, that especially in Marseille, there was really a lockdown. I had to rethink the role of exhibitors and what do you exhibit and why do you exhibit, why does it make sense to. So I thought… one thing that struck me was when Macron declared this law of the lockdown, in his speech, he said that there are two categories of people, the essential workers, who need to keep working and risk their lives and the nonessential workers they had to stay at home and they cannot go out except with an authorization. And there are about 200,000 people living in the streets of France. So there are a lot of people who are unhoused and somehow that was really for me, an entry point to the exhibition. So I started talking to social workers, to people who are really activists who have been, all their life fighting for the rights to housing and I wanted them to tell their histories and to tell their stories.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: First I want to ask you something else, which relates to the experience in Marseille to the American experience and to this issue of what is never neutral and everywhere we look architecture is the ultimate reflection of a society and a culture and a nation. So several years ago, President Trump issued an executive order in which he wanted to restrict the styles in which public buildings could be realized. And you wrote a rebuttal article to this, that you called “The Coloniality of an Executive Order” and in this response or this rebuttal, you argued that the neoclassical architecture that Trump was advocating to be the national... I'm going to use in quotes "style" was, oh and he was saying was more representative of democracy, actually engendered oppression since the ancient world. And I am going to quote you now. You argued, “In addition to fortifying conservatism and Eurocentrism incarnate in US-centrism, and undermining design freedom and contemporaneity, the order” President Trump’s order “eulogizes the massacres of Native Americans, enslaved African people, and other oppressed communities to ultimately reinforce white supremacy.” You went on, “Moreover, the idea of erecting a neoclassical building today evokes images from the Second World War, when Benito Mussolini in Italy and its colonial empire, Adolf Hitler in his Third Reich, Joseph Stalin in his empire, and others ordered the use of classical aesthetics to mark their occupied territory, unify the physical appearance of their presence, and celebrate powers that were certainly not based on democratic values.” That's a long quote but it is an extraordinary discourse that bears repeating. And I'm connecting this to the installation in the museum in Marseille in the Museum L'Histoire. Because in each of these instances, you implicate architecture in oppression on the national, regional, and local levels. So, I'd like to ask you what strategies might there be for designing architecture that responds to human needs, across race, gender, and class?

Samia Henni: I think the article was also saying that if we are living in democracy, why do we need to be imposed a certain way of thinking, a certain way of doing, a certain way of designing? I think this is really against the idea of freedom. So yes, it's about the histories that some specific styles are embodying, but also I think it's about rejecting an imposition of a frame. Again, *Unlearning Whiteness* that my Black colleagues at GSAPP, Columbia University brought, I think it's a very telling and important way of addressing this. I think it goes through education, the practice of architecture, the writing of the histories of architecture. And there are many people who are doing great work, and who are changing or challenging our disciplines. How to make this world we are living in a world that accepts differences. We talk a lot about diversity, but we don't speak enough about differences. I think for me, if we accept differences, we should be inclusive, but because we are not inclusive by definition, because we cannot accept differences, we have these lenses and we do look at the world with those lenses. I wrote this article called the “Colonial Ramifications.” Yes, another one, anti-colonial commitments. But let's say the “Colonial Ramifications" is there to say that try to do this exercise, to change the glasses, to change your lens through which you look at the world. I think that's a basic step that needs to happen and quickly. And if we unlearn whiteness, I think we could understand these differences.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: I was just going to say that going back to the housing question that you are so interested in and have raised in such a poignant way through the exhibition. Because I think that to get inside the problem of whiteness, getting inside of it, for example, through the issue of home, how people live at the most basic level, is perhaps a strategy. And unpacking this in a way that, for example, taking your class that addresses the issues of intersectionality, and looking at the actual application of that in a studio that is dealing with the issue of housing.

Samia Henni: I agree. I think in the pedagogy of education I'm advocating for is to really not indoctrinate students, but to really provide them with tools, with many instruments, ways of thinking, working, and they should compose their own menu somehow. In the exhibition, I work very differently. I am the one who says, or who takes command of the space, and...

Nina Stritzler-Levine: So, I have interrupt you to say that I would call that, and now we could get into the problems of language, but I would call that curatorial thinking. Just to go back to the word.

Samia Henni: It is curatorial thinking, but I have no problem with transforming the document I work with. With giving them completely another status and meaning of existence, so I intervene on them. I don't think that curators dare to do that, or cutting the sound, and editing the video in a completely different way, a way that is helping me to tell these different stories. I think there is a lot of resistance. There are a lot of gatekeepers. There are people who do not appreciate this way of intervening, of doing, of creating these different voices. For example, on the “Coloniality of an Executive Order,” I was threatened. I was attacked by white supremacists. I received emails of threat. These people sent emails to colleagues. So, there are attempts at intimidating people like me, women like me, people from a different let's say geography with different ways of thinking.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: So, that's incredible to think that this kind of violence and perpetration of your space like that is happening in the United States. But I want to bring you into the moment now, and give credence to your work now in your next project, and maybe other projects that I don't know about. Can you tell the listeners about the Preston H. Thomas Memorial Lectures that you're organizing at Cornell. And maybe tell us about things that I don't know about in terms of your exhibitor projects, and your current goals for the future.

Samia Henni: The 2020 Preston H. Thomas Memorial Lectures that I'm convening this semester, I titled "Into the Deserts: Questions of Coloniality and Toxicity." The claim is that deserts are not empty as they have long been seen and represented. Deserts both hot and cold have often served to search, extract, and transport various natural resources such as oil and gas, as well as to design and build the new city's infrastructure, touristic complexes, farming systems, solar powers, climate, and aerospace research centers, chemical weapon testing complexes, nuclear weapon research centers, and testing sites and all the settlements. How were these designs managed and implemented? What were the impact on nomadic, semi-nomadic, and sedentary populations and their environment? To what extent does desert transformation influence the political economic assets of the government in question? So, I'm convening this lecture series at Cornell University. They are all online, open to the public. I'm interested in the question of the desert because I'm working on this book project, colonial toxicity on the French nuclear testing sites and military bases in the Sahara. I think that the question of the desert in architecture schools is not very much discussed. I think that we really need to insist on the fact that part of what happened in the world's deserts, so these tests but also all the operations that I mentioned earlier are part of what we call today Capitalocene or Anthropocene. So, art of these transformation of nature. People today who are living in those spaces are still suffering. So, it's not a question of the past, it's a question of the present.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: If I could ask you one, well, I'll say final, final question. Which is I wonder now in this moment of the pandemic, when we are all in some form or other connected to our own homes, and have time, maybe more time to reflect, I wonder if I can ask you what you are reading now? And what your personal, quiet pursuits are to broaden your own knowledge, and what you're doing in a quiet, personal way to that end.

Samia Henni: *Écrits sur l'aliénation et la liberté.* Frantz Fanon, writings on alienation and freedom. I think it's a fantastic collection of his writing as a psychiatrist, as a political writer, but also as a theater writer. I think what I'm seeing this pandemic is doing. I think we really need to oppose exploitation. There are many institutions who are taking advantage of this pandemic to exploit people who are maybe unpaid, or who have to work extra hours to satisfy the emergency. I think this emergency is a very long term one. Is not going to end in November or in December. So, I think we really need to rethink how the institution can sustain this workload, and the extraordinary labor that is being required. I'm not thinking about academia only. Yeah. I have really a range of colleagues also in art institutional, or public, or private institutions. But I think while this world is changing, I think we do need to rethink the labor dynamics as well. While this is happening and not after, I think is really important. Maybe what they haven't said about the future, the goal for this not really the symposium but my work, what's maybe

important to mention is that on the 1st of January, 2020, the French government classified already declassified archival documents. So, the documents that are in relation to the second World War, to the India-China War, to the Algerian Revolution, the Algerian War are now not open to the public. So, these moments are somehow they feed me, and they give me more energy to work on topics that I'm interested in.

Nina Stritzler-Levine: Well, that is surprising and unfortunate. And a clear sign of a government trying to suppress the details of its own history, and that's really very sad. But to end this discussion, I want to thank you for your time, for your thoughtful responses, for being an inspiration to us in the many different practices that you work in as historian, theorist, exhibitor. Thank you so much for participating.

Samia Henni: Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Nina. Thank you so much for having me.

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