



The Digital Temple Mount

Yusef Said al-Natsheh

A critical tour of the Davidson Centre (a museum built on the remains of an Umayyad palace near Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque)

"We want to place the foundation stone...in people's minds first."

- Rabbi of the "Temple Mount Faithful"

The Ethan and Miriam Davidson Centre, or simply the Davidson Centre, is named for the parents of the donor who generously supported this establishment. After two years of construction and preparations, the museum opened to the public in mid-2001. It is located inside Jerusalem's Old City, near its southern wall, and just a few meters east of Bab al-Maghariba, also known as the Moors' Gate. The site sits on a section of Islamic Waqf land that was seized by Israeli authorities and subsequently transformed into



an archaeological park southeast of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The Centre, as such, faces the southwest corner of the al-Aqsa Mosque, and is the site of the Robinson Arch, which is prominently featured in the Centre's films and laser imaging.

The archaeological park stretches the entire length of the al-Aqsa Mosque's southern wall, and is split into two sections by a Jerusalem Old City wall that extends south from the Double Gate and then turns west near Mount Zion. The western section of the park lies within Jerusalem's Old City and stretches several meters to the north, parallel to the southwest corner of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The eastern section lies outside the Old City walls, in an area that falls between the walls of Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque and the public road that encircles the Old City from the east and south, continuing on to Silwan.

The site first drew the attention of travellers and explorers in the nineteenth century, when architectural remains and artefacts were discovered, some of them subsequently named for explorers the likes of Edward Robinson, Charles Warren and Charles Wilson. Since then, the site has undergone numerous archaeological excavations, some of which were conducted during the 1960s by the British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon. The deepest and most extensive excavations, however, were conducted by the Israelis immediately following the 1967 War; these digs were driven not purely by academic pursuits, as the following review will show, but also to fulfil political motivations.

These excavations uncovered layers of artefacts and architectural remains dating back many periods. The most famous of the finds were Roman and Byzantine artefacts. But the most impressive find was the uncovering of an Umayyad complex, consisting of several palaces and their numerous facilities. The Davidson Museum was built within one section of the base of

one of these palaces, according to the museum's explanatory signs. Unfortunately, visitors are provided with this information at a rather late stage, only after they arrive at the museum's second hall. Further, the general framework of the finds presented in the museum are confused by the fact that in their archaeological publications, the Israelis describe part of the Greek and Roman periods as the "Second Temple period," and depict this period as independent of all others.

The museum's apparent goal is to shed light on the development of the al-Aqsa Mosque area (the Temple Mount) during the Roman (Second Temple), Byzantine and Umayyad periods. However, most of the museum's displays focus on the Roman period, with the intent of focusing on the Temple itself. The museum thus seems to have an ulterior motive - to leave an impression of what the alleged Second Temple must have looked like, an impression that might be difficult to otherwise imagine after having visited the al-Aqsa Mosque. The museum appears to have been established to facilitate one's envisioning the Temple, either before or after a visit to the archaeological park where the Arab and Islamic remains have been defaced and marginalized, thus furthering the political goals of the presentation.¹

The museum is contemporary in style, and makes use of all available modern technology. Several companies and specialized consultants worked to create a synthesis between the Umayyad architectural remains and traditional and modern building materials such as glass, wood and burnished steel. These additions are not built upon the remains of the Umayyad palace, but rather are independent structures.

As the area is an archaeological site and located within an archaeological park, most of it lies below the present ground level (the excavations went down 13 meters). The area comprises three levels that blend the modern



and the ancient in an effective manner, using contemporary lighting and glass panels for the explanatory signs that focus on the history and architecture of the area in the Roman and Umayyad periods, as well as numerous maps and three-dimensional reliefs of Jerusalem.

The first thing to greet visitors to the museum is a collection of images of the Second Temple created by artists and architects, that are based on their own imaginings, date to various time periods, and rely on various architectural styles and representations of the artists' cultures. The earliest of these is depicted on a coin and is attributed to Bar-Kokhba, dating to 60 years after the destruction of the Temple by Titus. The most contemporary image is from the Renaissance. Display cases exhibit coins from the Roman period, pottery shards, and a historical timeline of Jerusalem.

This display is one example of how the Centre places a clear emphasis on the period referred to as that of the Second Temple. In comparison with other venues, however, the references to the Islamic and Umayyad periods are better in this museum. While not given equal attention, visitors do not encounter total disregard for the Arab and Islamic periods or a selective and expansionist approach to certain historical periods (in comparison, for example, with the Citadel Museum, also known as David's Museum, near Jaffa Gate.)

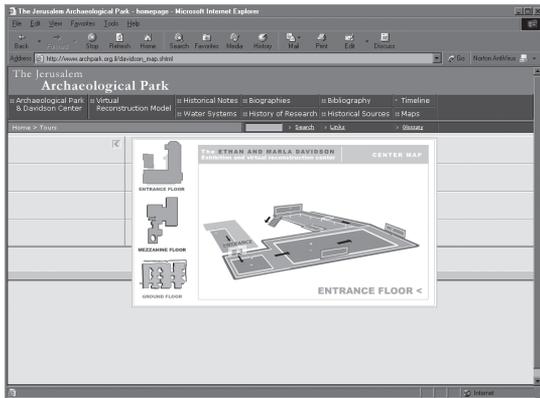
The Davidson Centre offers the most modern audio-visual and technical equipment to serve the Centre's goals. There is a short, four-minute film shown alternately in English and Hebrew about the archaeological excavations that took place between 1840 and 1996 in the vicinity of the al-Aqsa Mosque. There is also a longer film that features an imaginary visit to the Temple during the Roman period, from the time the idea of the Temple was conceived, until it became a reality. The film relies on a blend of imagination

(reconstruction) and the discovered remains of artefacts. It is produced in Hollywood style, at high cost and with emotive devices, as though all the residents of Palestine and Jerusalem during the Roman period were Jews who venerated the Temple, and there was no other culture or religion of value during that time.

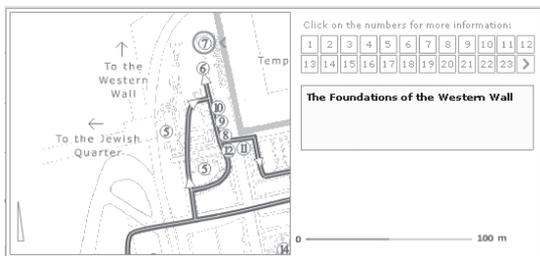
The Centre also features a program (installed on a computer 30,000 times more powerful than a regular personal computer) that simulates Jerusalem during the Roman period, with a focus on the Temple area. The program makes use of the same advanced digital technology used by the United States Air Force to simulate flying. Its creation was supervised by Lisa Snyder of the architecture and urban planning department of the University of California, Los Angeles, and is only operated by the museum guards. Interested specialists may take a three-week training in order to learn to operate the program.

Just to give an idea of what this special computer feature does, it is sufficient to say that it makes it possible to view the most intricate details of the Roman city. Jerusalem can be viewed in its entirety in three dimensions, and then one is able to zoom in on the geometric or floral designs (such as leaves or grapes) that cover one of its column crowns or frames. In order to create the program, the computer was fed topographic reliefs of the city, photographs from the air and images of artefacts. The computer now displays a simulation of the Temple as it might be imagined, and can also display photographic images of its architectural or decorative styles as found in excavations.

Should all of these displays and technical media prove insufficient to convince visitors of the alleged reality of the Second Temple - despite scant material evidence - and its history and development, the museum also provides complimentary use of a computer



Surfing the Temple at the website of the Jerusalem Archeological Park and the Davidson Museum.



At the website of the Davidson Museum, visitors are given a detailed tour of the Archaeological Park and sites around the al-Aqsa Mosque, but not the mosque itself.



This graphic from the Davidson Museum website portrays the Second Temple, as the site's creators imagine it to have looked.

that offers information also available on the Centre's website, www.archpark.org.il. This information encompasses the archaeological park, the Davidson Centre, archaeological maps and walks in the area and its surroundings, and brief information on the archaeologists who worked in the area, as well as historical sources and references, a timeline, glossary and general information about visiting the site. Each of these topics is

split into sections as determined by the organization that operates the site. In other words, this is all displayed in a simple, user-friendly and scientific manner, that convinces visitors that all being presented here is reality and based carefully on documented archaeological excavations and historical information.

There are also other matters that might seem rather commonplace at this point:

- The museum lacks explanatory placards in Arabic, providing information only in English and Hebrew. The archaeological park, however, provides written explanations in Arabic.
- Indication that the site was originally an Umayyad palace is provided late in the visit and only briefly, failing to catch the attention of visitors.
- To provide balance between the various periods the museum addresses, the Umayyad display should be expanded, particularly in terms of explanatory films and computer programs.
- The creative and captivating style of the displays should not distract visitors from the fact that the Centre lies on occupied ground. Moreover, the eastern section of the archaeological park was built upon Islamic Waqf land whose legal status remains in abeyance. The Islamic Waqf department has not consented to these excavations in its capacity as the rightful landowner. On the contrary, most of the complaints and reservations it has sent to UNESCO and the Israeli authorities have fallen on deaf ears.
- There is a very real question as to why the museum is located on this particular Islamic site, especially that there is a famous three-dimensional



relief in the Holy Land Hotel in West Jerusalem that tourists and interested individuals may visit and which provides a good idea of what Roman Jerusalem was like. That relief is developed and improved whenever new technology is made available.

With regard to reconstructing and "imagining" of archaeological sites, there are regulations and rules, such as the Venice regulations, that are internationally recognized by specialized institutions and circles and forbid reconstruction or simulation without a sufficient foundation of documented and detailed information. The Centre's supervisor, Ronny Reich, admits that the mission of defining and selecting the information that was presented here caused great pain and embarrassment to the researchers involved, as they had to choose the computer simulation details from several thousand different images.² If this is the case, is Jacob Fish, director of external relations and travelling exhibitions in the Israeli Antiquities Authority, describing the Centre accurately when he says, "It - the simulation film - is not like the film *Gladiator*³, but rather, is based on archaeological evidence"⁴? For example, one could ask, does the discovery of a particular decoration on the crown of one column justify decorating all of the crowns in the same manner or at all?

I only wish that this matter could conclude with these technical comments and criticisms⁵ of the museum. Obviously, however, the matter is much more serious if one makes the connection between what is happening in the Palestinian arena and incidents at the al-Aqsa Mosque, al-Haram al-Sharif and Jerusalem, and the goals of this museum. It is not difficult to link political and judicial developments related to the al-Aqsa Mosque area and cultural and propagandistic movements. One discovers that the matters are closely intertwined, and

that one cannot easily separate between the political and cultural, both of which are threatening the region with far-reaching changes.

Take the behaviour of fundamentalist Jewish groups such as Kach, Gush Emunim, Ateret Kohanim and the so-called "Temple Mount Faithful," this last led by the extremist Gershon Solomon, which have incessantly and publicly threatened the al-Aqsa Mosque since 1967. The conduct of these groups has recently become more public and extreme, and the authorities have taken to turning a blind eye to their ambitions. Their provocative annual parades and marches reached a new height in July 2000, when they attempted, as usual, to lay the foundation stone of the Third Temple. The police permitted these extremists to do so, albeit at Bab al-Maghariba, rather than at the al-Aqsa Mosque as they had desired. Then on 4 October 2001, the police first allowed, and later recanted, their go-ahead for the Temple Mount Faithful to again celebrate the placing of the foundation stone, since the group was this time insisting on laying the stone in the al-Aqsa Mosque itself, rather than at Bab al-Maghariba.

Such conduct, as well as the once-secret and now-public plans by these groups to rebuild the Temple (leaks of the plans repeatedly gauge the international response), and the preparation of the menorah and priestly garb for religious rituals to be conducted in the Temple, as well as children's plays and other activities that celebrate the coming of the Third Temple, cannot be viewed by Palestinians under occupation as isolated from this museum and its goals. Indeed, the efforts complement each other. "We want to place the foundation stone... in people's minds first," said the rabbi of the Temple Mount Faithful. The second step will become much easier. These are the foundations for convincing the world of the Temple Mount

project, despite extreme opposition by Arabs and Muslims.

As such, this museum is honey infused with poison, and aims, after arming itself with excavations and science, to serve a political goal for the Israeli occupation in the city of Jerusalem and this sacred area. We must not forget that these excavations were conducted in violation of international law and charters. Moreover, if this site must be developed, it would prove more beneficial that it serve all of the historical periods, rather than focusing on one select period at the expense of others.

It is difficult for the general public, and particularly Western Jewish and Christian tourists, to leave this museum without being convinced of what they have seen, and without being filled with nostalgia and longing. Rebutting the statements made in the exhibitions is a very complicated task, and requires combining numerous sincere, patient and scientific efforts in order to attain the same technical and academic heights seen in this museum.

In conclusion, is it even worth asking (or screaming, for that matter), where are the funds and visions of those seeking to safeguard the Arabness and Islamicity of Jerusalem? Where are the cultural programs that address a broader audience than the Arab and Islamic self? Why is there a hesitation to support cultural programs, while focusing solely on social and economic projects?

Yousef Al-Natsheh is a researcher of Islamic architecture and lecturer at the Institute of Islamic Archeology of al-Quds University.

Endnotes

¹ Included in these "alterations" is the erection of a large awning in one of the Umayyad palace's courtyards that is inappropriate for the site, and which was built with modern, rather than traditional materials.

² "It's a traumatic job for a scholar to decide between several thousand possible versions," as Judith Sudilovsky put it (see Judith Sudilovsky, "Virtual Temple Mount, Computerized Exhibit Opens at the Foot of Ancient Site," in *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Vol. 27 No. 4, 2001, 16.)

³ *Gladiator* is a Hollywood film produced in 2001, and which won several Oscar awards. The film is based on an imaginary tale that takes place in the Roman period.

⁴ "This is not the movie *Gladiator*. It is all based on archeological evidence." - Sudilovsky.

⁵ For a positive account, see Sudilovsky.