



## The work of Charles Ashbee: Ideological Urban Visions with Everyday City Spaces

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Charles Ashbee: Architect and Urban  
Planner. Jerusalem, 1919.

During the early years of the British Mandate period, the Pro-Jerusalem Society was established by British planners and architects in order to introduce Western style heritage procedures and produce plans for Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> The Society desired to preserve and promote an antique image of the Holy City in keeping with the ideas of Jerusalem that were central to the European imagination. Its approach regarded the walled Old City as an iconic enclosure of holy sites, disconnected from, and better than, the surrounding New City. One main planning tool in delivering this vision of Jerusalem was the designation of a zone of landscaped open space around the entirety of the city walls that had the effect of recreating the Old City as an 'object' within the growing city. In these endeavours we can find the main intentions of the Society: protecting the heritage of the Old City, bettering view lines within the city's historic

basin (that became known as the ‘visual’ or ‘holy’ basin) and the establishment of a continuous belt of parkland around the city walls.

Significantly, the thinking behind the Society’s work has had a major influence on all British planning for Jerusalem, and later, upon Israeli plans for the city; Elisha Efrat, a former head of national and regional plans in the Ministry of the Interior stated in 1993 that “since the British planning perspectives of Jerusalem were laid down, no other dominant town planning elements were formed in the city.”<sup>22</sup> This has been evident in the post-1967 planning in East Jerusalem where the Israeli National Parks Authority initiated outline plans for a National Park around the Old City wall, similar in extent to that proposed by the Pro-Jerusalem society in 1922; the Ministry of the Interior formally declared the area as a National Park in 1974.

Given the effect that British planning ideas still continue to have on Jerusalem, it is worthwhile to examine more closely the proposals made by the originators of this type of thinking on the city. The focus here will fall on Charles Ashbee whose work for the Pro-Jerusalem Society between 1918 and 1922 reveals subtle but significant contradictions that arose from having to accommodate local structures that supported day-to-day life within the idealized vision of Jerusalem that the Society themselves initially conceived and which have been used to guide and even legitimize decisions made by ensuing generations of planners and architects.

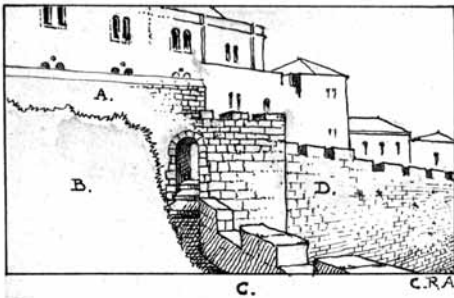
## **Ideal Landscapes and the Use of Open Space**

Charles Ashbee was appointed ‘civic advisor’ in 1918 by Military Governor Ronald Storrs and was Secretary to the Pro-Jerusalem Society between 1919 and 1922. He was a British architect steeped in the Arts and Crafts tradition of William Morris; it was a background that contributed significantly to the work of the Society and to the deeply romantic sensibilities he held about the medieval walled city and its surrounding landscape. This is evident in the way that he visualized his likes and dislikes and his aspirations for its development. Part of his working procedure was to search out and photograph traditional scenes of Palestinian life around the Old City. At the same time, he contrasted these ethnographic studies with photos of new construction that he considered to be inappropriate in the context of Jerusalem’s ancient urban fabric (Fig. 1). The images reinforced the Society’s stated aversion to modern development around the Old City that encroached upon or obscured their own idealized vision of a pastoral landscape that should meet the orderly walls of a medieval fortress, which in turn protected the holy sites within. In the Society’s proceedings, the photographs are accompanied by Ashbee’s own drawings that depict his proposed view of the city following the clearance of the ‘obstructions’ and the establishment of his desired landscape (Fig. 2).

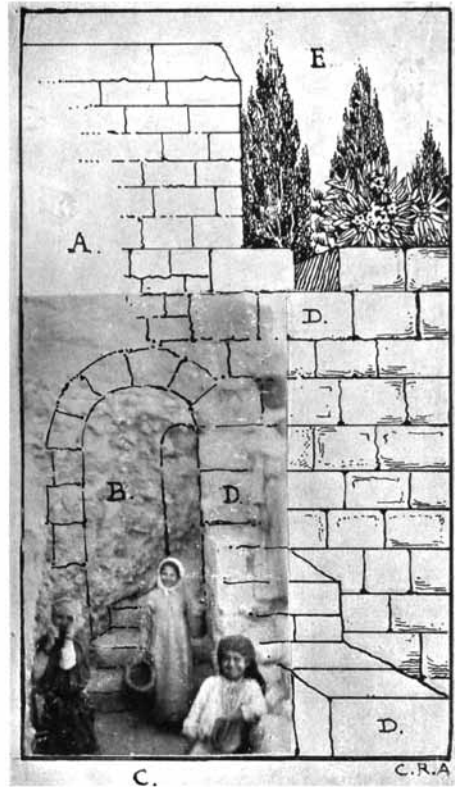
One of Ashbee’s key proposals was a series of gardens that would link up to form the spine of a proposed park system around the entire Old City (Fig. 3). From a distance, the crenellated walls and towers were to be viewed within a green setting,



No. 35.  
The Rampart Walk covered with 12 ft. of "tip," and showing a new wall built on top of the "tip."



No. 36.  
The Rampart Walk, showing how the encroachment (No. 35) has been tunnelled.



No. 37.  
The Rampart Walk, the same as No. 36, showing fellahin girls at work.

- A. New wall built on the tip.
- B. Tip.
- C. Rampart Walk newly cleared.
- D. Old city wall.
- E. New garden being made.

Fig. 1: An example of Charles Ashbee's working procedure. Anti-clockwise from top-left: A photograph of the Old City walls along which Ashbee proposed building the rampart walk; a drawing of the same site with the proposed tunnelling through the site's 'encroachments' in order to form the rampart walk; a collage showing fellahin girls working on the construction of the rampart walk. Source: *Illustrations 35, 36, 37 from Jerusalem, 1918-1920. London, J. Murray.*

like a jewel enhanced and separated from its more pedestrian and modern urban surroundings in the New City. From within, the new landscape was to be viewed from a walkway that would be built into the ramparts of the Ottoman wall. However, the reality was that as the city expanded beyond its walls in the nineteenth century, areas just outside the main gates had become built up with commercial structures, sometimes of questionable construction. These were partly directed at the developing tourist industry and they helped to facilitate connections between the Old City and the new outlying neighbourhoods. The Pro-Jerusalem Society focused much of their ire on such rag-tag buildings around the Old City gateways, Ashbee calling them "miserable booths that disgrace the modern city."<sup>3</sup> With Ashbee's greenbelt proposals, such construction around the gates was vulnerable to demolition, and in effect, the

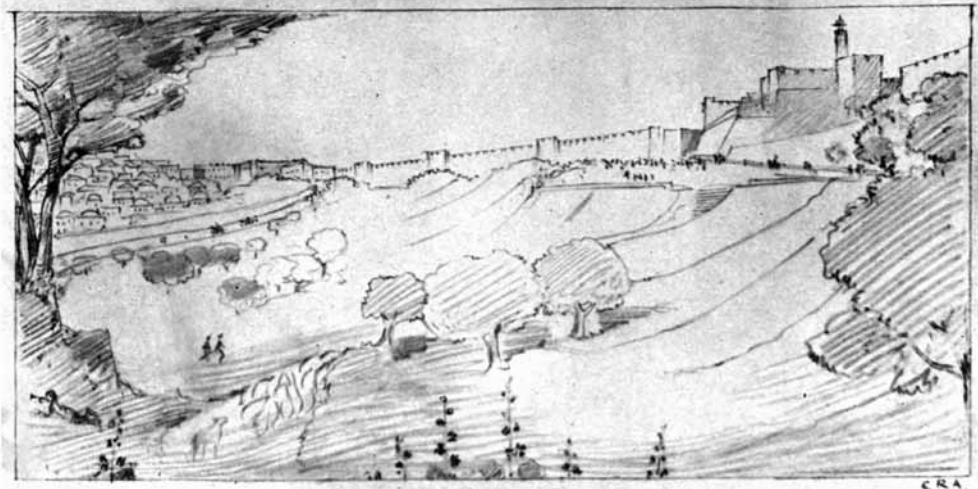


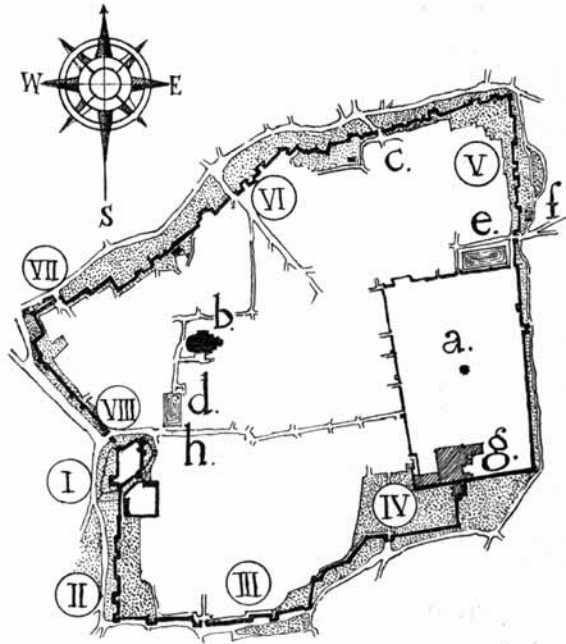
Fig. 2: Jaffa Gate, existing and proposed. Top: A photograph looking towards Jaffa Gate from outside the Old City showing the buildings along the road to Jaffa Gate. Bottom: A drawing by Ashbee of the same view towards the Old City following the clearance of these buildings and the establishment of his desired pastoral landscape. *Source: Illustrations 44,45 from Jerusalem, 1918-1920. London, J. Murray.*

Society set a collision course between an idealized vision for Jerusalem and the urban structures that supported the day-to-day lives and incomes of the city's inhabitants.

It is unclear whether Ashbee's thinking here is simply aesthetic. He believed that these parks around the Old City would offer other benefits, stating that

The laying out or reservation into park land does not necessarily mean special or ornamental plantation. The bulk of the land will, it is hoped, always remain under fellahin tillage or even in its present wildness.<sup>4</sup>

Ashbee proposes two possible modes for the land: tilled and wild. In calling it wild, he may have been referring simply to what he perceived as an unkempt state; it was not uncommon for Westerners to assume that fallow land was not owned and never



No. 26.

*Key Plan of the Rampart Walk.*

- |      |                                     |    |                               |
|------|-------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------|
| I    | Citadel area.                       | a. | Dome of the Rock.             |
| II   | Armenian Convent area.              | b. | Church of the Holy Sepulchre. |
| III  | Zion Gate (Bab en Nebi Da-ud) area. | c. | Herod's Gate.                 |
| IV   | Tyropæum.                           | d. | Pool of Hezekiah.             |
| V    | Bezetha.                            | e. | Birket Israel.                |
| VI   | Damascus Gate (Bab el Amud) area.   | f. | Birket Sitt Miriam.           |
| VII  | New Gate (Bab el Jedid) area.       | g. | El Aqsa Mosque.               |
| VIII | Jaffa Gate (Bab el Khalil) area.    | h. | David Street.                 |

Fig. 3: The Spine of the Park System. A plan by Ashbee that proposed encircling the Old City with a continuous series of gardens that could be viewed from the rampart walk along the top of the Old City walls. This garden belt would form the spine of the larger Park System. *Source: Illustration 26 from Jerusalem, 1918-1920. London, J. Murray.*

tended, and therefore wild. On the other hand, he may have been associating it with the sort of biblical wilderness he had expected and wanted to find. Cultivated land was also attractive to Ashbee, and he may have been hoping to preserve the basic relationship between the city and the surrounding agricultural land that was an integral component of the day-to-day life of the nearby villages; in the first decades of the twentieth century, this farmland still existed but was under increasing pressure by modern urban development. In this sense, there seems to be an acknowledgment that the area around the Old City was an active landscape that was used by the Palestinian villagers. But Ashbee also offers a firm nod to the vision of a timeless landscape, populated by an unchanging peasant society, to such an extent that he questions the modern development of the city:



Fig. 4: Commerce at Damascus Gate, 1918-1920. A photograph selected by Ashbee of a view of Damascus Gate from outside the Old City at some time between 1918-1920. The image shows commercial buildings were constructed right up to the Old City walls either side of the gate; A busy commercial scene including Bedouins is shown in the foreground. *Source: Illustration 7 from Jerusalem, 1918-1920. London, J. Murray.*

An industrialised Palestine...is a questionable benefit...may it not be better to leave as it is that peasant society, which still has so much dignity and beauty?<sup>5</sup>

For Ashbee, the untouched or agrarian landscape has an aesthetic value that is lacking in a modern industrialised scene. In his writing about planning, he clearly wanted Jerusalem to be groomed and girdled into a dream from a bygone era, designing his parkland belt and continuous rampart walk on the city wall to be “the most perfect, mediaeval enceinte in existence.”<sup>6</sup> It was an orientalist vision, and problematic in the sense that it relied upon an idealized, peasant society remaining intertwined with an agrarian landscape during a time both of modernization and of an awakening of local sensibilities that were eventually to resist the imposition of such Western misconceptions. Yet, Ashbee also seems to have realized that Jerusalem was worth conserving not only because of “the things themselves, the streets, the houses, spires, towers, and domes, but the way of living ...”<sup>7</sup>. This attitude, where the aesthetic was necessary only as much as it could be grounded in everyday life and work, was quite typical of Arts and Crafts ideas.<sup>8</sup> In it we find a thread of Ashbee’s thinking that roots him more firmly into the urban realities of Jerusalem.

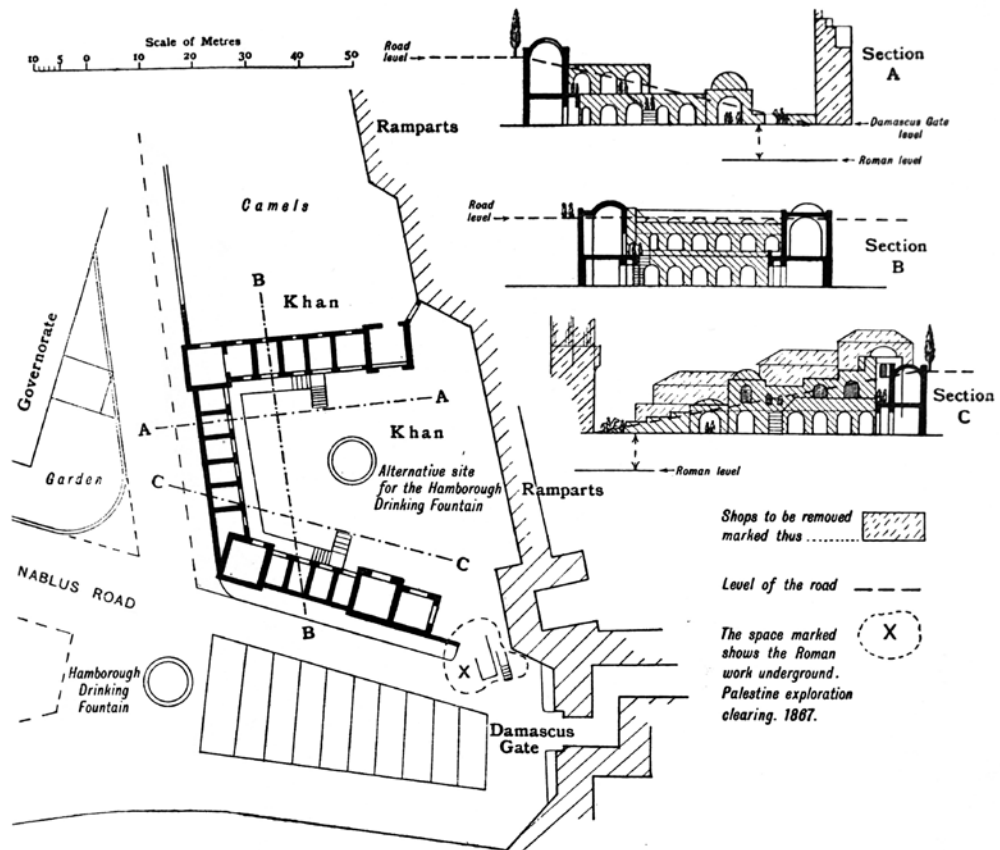


Fig. 5: The proposed Valero Khan at Damascus Gate. A set of plans and sections by Ashbee showing his proposals for redeveloping the area outside Damascus Gate. The drawings indicate the shops to be removed and the extent of the new Khan. *Source: Illustration 44 from Jerusalem, 1920-1922. London, J. Murray.*

## The Valero Khan at Damascus Gate: an Urban Proposition

The combination of the aesthetic and the everyday are evident in a number of architectural schemes that Ashbee designed for the city; one example was a khan, (or caravanserai market) at Damascus Gate.<sup>9</sup> In this project, and in another similar one at Jaffa Gate, he realizes that extensive gardens have little place. Although he is keen to get rid of the existing structures that he describes as “unsightly shops and corrugated iron buildings that obliterate the Damascus Gate,”<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 4), he proposes replacing them with a two-storey ‘U’ shaped khan that would form a courtyard, using the city wall as the fourth side (Fig. 5). Instead of treating the wall as something too precious to touch, he uses it to help create a new market. This may have been due, at least in part, to financial pressure. Ashbee complained of lack of public funds and the difficulty of convincing private enterprise to join forces with public bodies to realize projects devised by the Pro-Jerusalem Society; thus he was pleased to gain the support of Jerusalem entrepreneurs, the wealthy Sephardic Valero family, for his Damascus



Fig. 6: Commerce in the Damascus Gate amphitheater, June 2009. Damascus Gate from outside the Old City with the amphitheater in the foreground; Palestinians display goods on the steps and in mobile stalls during a busy but temporary Saturday market. *Source: Conflict in Cities.*

Gate project. Ashbee did not expect what he called ‘the Valero Khan’ to be particularly lucrative, but the Valeros may have seen some prospects in it having already had experience in establishing the Mahane Yehuda market. In any case, Ashbee designed markets at both Jaffa and Damascus Gates to be built by the Valero family.<sup>11</sup>

The Damascus Gate khan was to provide overnight accommodation for the Bedouins and their camels during their visits to the city for purposes of trade. Again this atavistic function appears firmly rooted in Ashbee’s orientalist image of Jerusalem; it reinforces his stated antipathy to the industrialization of Palestinian society and pays no heed to the imminent arrival of a modernized commercial transport system that would have made the traditional uses of the khan redundant. Nonetheless, the architecture of the khan seems eminently suited to the gateway area. In its verticality, the building makes use of the natural slope of the ground down to Damascus Gate so that the khan does not obscure views towards the Old City. Whilst in plan, the design continues the urban grain between the old and new city, not only by building up to the walls and gate but by aligning the new building with Nablus Road and Sultan Suleiman Street, which would have reinforced the street pattern outside the Old City. Damascus Gate was, and still is, a major commercial hub through which trade moves back and forth between Old City and the New. The Valero Khan





Fig. 7: Parkland around the Old City, June 2009. Parkland that has been established outside the Old City after 1967 between Damascus Gate and New Gate. *Source: Conflict in Cities.*

plan was essentially an urban proposition and robust architectural form located at an important gateway that connected the Old City with the rest of Jerusalem to the north. It is worthwhile to note that such configurations of streets and courtyards are resilient and adaptable urban typologies that can survive cycles of changing use; one only has to look at examples of Ottoman khans from Nablus to Nicosia that are being restored in the twenty-first century to see the value that is still placed on such structures.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the active market commerce at Damascus Gate, which exists even today in a city that is severely limited in its ability to cope with the economic fallout of ongoing political conflict, reinforces Ashbee's interest in the inherent strength and longevity of a particularly modest urban typology. Unfortunately, the project was never realized.

The plans for the Damascus Gate area after 1922 do not retain the urban and architectural ideas of Ashbee's thinking. The proposals that followed, most notably by Henry Kendall in the 1940s,<sup>13</sup> do not attempt to site buildings up to or near the city walls; neither do they attempt to connect New City street patterns to the walled city or to make provision for the commercial topography around Damascus Gate. Instead, the emphasis is on aesthetic spectacle and reification of the Old City. Kendall's unbuilt scheme at Damascus Gate for a baroque piazza with curving, ramped flanks<sup>14</sup>

was later reworked as the present amphitheatre that was constructed by the Israeli municipality. Today, the structure is never used as an amphitheatre but in an ad hoc fashion, it accommodates the overflow of the market inside the gate and the stepped seats are used to display cheap shoes from China and large trays of fresh bread. The amphitheatre is part of a formal landscape established after 1967 where the thousands of people that cross the gate every day are more incidental than central to the thrust of the design<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 6).

Charles Ashbee was a central figure in the Pro-Jerusalem Society. There is no question that his emphasis on an aesthetic and imagined Jerusalem oriented to Western imagery was in keeping with the Society's aims and today are clearly recognized as orientalist in nature. But as much as his Arts and Crafts background provided a natural affinity with the Society, its emphasis upon combining work and aesthetics gave him a window into actual life in Jerusalem. Compared with fellow Pro-Jerusalem Society advisor Patrick Geddes, who believed that Jerusalem was "the most important and the most extensive Sacred Park in the world,"<sup>16</sup> Ashbee's concern for everyday activities seems to respond more effectively to the local population and to urban conditions. Reassessing Ashbee's contribution first of all underlines certain contradictions in his thinking, and more significantly, opens up the possibility of alternative approaches to the planning of Jerusalem that once again could be applicable<sup>17</sup>. So far, in Jerusalem today, it is the Geddes' vision that has prevailed, with the actual construction of extensive parkland around the Old City after the 1974 declaration of a national park (Fig. 7). As a \$100 million Israeli development plan for the holy basin, drawn up in 2005 and involving the establishment of an extended series of national parks around the Old City, is "becoming a reality, and at an accelerated pace"<sup>18</sup>, the question is relevant once again.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 The primary source for the Society is: C R Ashbee, ed., *Jerusalem 1918-1920. Being the Records of the Pro-Jerusalem Council during the Period of the British Military Administration*, vol 1, London: John Murray, 1921; C R Ashbee, ed. *Jerusalem 1920-1922. Being the Records of the Pro-Jerusalem Council during the First Two Years of the Civil Administration*, vol.2, London: John Murray, 1924. Henceforth referred to as *Jerusalem 1918-20* and *Jerusalem 1920-22*.
- 2 Elisha Efrat, 1993. 'British Town Planning Perspectives of Jerusalem in Transition', *Planning Perspectives*, 8.4, 377 – 393 (p.393).
- 3 *Jerusalem 1920-1922*, p. 21
- 4 *Jerusalem 1918-1920*, p. 24
- 5 C R Ashbee *Palestine Notebook*, London: Heinemann, 1923, quoted in: R. Fuchs, and Gilbert Herbert, 2001, 'A Colonial Portrait of Jerusalem, British Architecture in Jerusalem of the Mandate 1917-48', in *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment*, ed., Nezar AlSayyad, Westport, Conn: Praeger, p. 81-108 (p. 88).
- 6 *Jerusalem 1918-1920*, p. 21
- 7 *Jerusalem 1920-1922*, p. 5

- 8 Ashbee came to Jerusalem after the failure of his anti-industrial guild in Chipping Campden (Fuchs and Herbert, 2001, p.88).
- 9 Reported in *Jerusalem 1920-22*, p. 21-24.
- 10 Ibid., p. 24.
- 11 *Jerusalem 1920-22*, p. 21-24. The market at Jaffa Gate was not designed to touch the wall.
- 12 The Buyuk Khan in the northern half of the Old City of Nicosia was restored in 2004 under the auspices of the Nicosia Masterplan and is used for tourist and commercial purposes. In 2009 the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Khan Al Wakala was underway in the Old City of Nablus.
- 13 All of the major town plans for Jerusalem in the British Mandate are reviewed in: Henry Kendall, 1948. *Jerusalem: The City Plan, Preservation and Development during the British Mandate, 1918-1948*. London: H.M.S.O.
- 14 Ibid., p. 15, figures 27, 28.
- 15 Wendy Pullan, 2006. 'Locating the Civic in the Frontier: Damascus Gate', in *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, eds., Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar (Cambridge Mass and London: MIT Press and Frankfurt: Revolver, p. 109-22 (p.120)
- 16 Patrick Geddes, 1919 'Jerusalem Actual and Possible, A Preliminary Report to the Chief Administrator of Palestine and the Military Governor of Jerusalem on Town Planning and City Improvements.' quoted in: Benjamin Hyman, 1994. 'British Planners in Palestine, 1918-1936', unpublished PhD dissertation, London School of Economics (p. 135).
- 17 Hyman believes that Ashbee's main contribution was at the detailed design level, and that added little at the planning level. Ibid., (p. 394).
- 18 Ir-Amim (2008) *State of Affairs – Jerusalem 2008. Political Developments and Changes on the Ground*. Jerusalem, Ir-Amim. (p. 26) [http://www.ir-amim.org.il/Eng/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/AnnualReport2008Eng\(1\).pdf](http://www.ir-amim.org.il/Eng/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/AnnualReport2008Eng(1).pdf) (accessed 14 February 2009)