

Book Reviews

What Kind of Past Shall We Build?

Ricca's Reinventing Jerusalem

Maximilian Gwiazda

What Kind of Past Shall We Build?

A Review of Simone Ricca's Reinventing Jerusalem:

Israel's Reconstruction of the Jewish Quarter after 1967

London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, 258 pp.

Maximilian Gwiazda

Simone Ricca's study of the rebuilding of the Jewish Quarter presents the first critical account of this key episode in Israeli architecture and its role in the urban reconfiguration of Jerusalem since 1967. This multidisciplinary investigation is a significant addition to the recent interest in the political role of architecture and urban design in Israel-Palestine, which is producing new insights into the spatial dimensions of ethno-national conflict.¹ Ricca makes a persuasive case for the need to study the politics of heritage in Jerusalem from a specifically architectural and urban point of view, which the extensive literature on the politics and planning of the city has tended to neglect, privileging the territorial lens. Written by a practising conservation architect, *Reinventing Jerusalem* challenges urban designers and heritage practitioners to question the underlying ideological motivations and uses of their work, which they frequently ignore, or conceal behind the technical aspects of their professions.

Ricca's states his basic theme succinctly at the outset of his book, which is to examine the 'interaction between heritage, national identity and the built fabric in the Old City of Jerusalem from the point of view of the impact of the Zionist reading of history on its townscape.' (p.1). He demonstrates the crucial role the reconstructed Jewish Quarter was accorded in Israel's efforts to represent an age-old Jewish presence within, and claim to, the city. Throughout the book Ricca is highly critical of Israel's conservation practices, which rest on the systematic disenfranchising of the Palestinian population and has caused irreparable damage to Jerusalem's urban heritage.

The clarity of the structure and consistent use of relevant concepts from heritage studies helps the reader through the analysis of an impressive range of evidence, which includes interviews with residents, officials and architects in charge of the works, a survey of the Israeli media coverage, UNESCO documents and archives, as well as visual representations of the Old City before and after 1967, and extensive

site observations. Chapter 1 reveals the dominance of ideological imperatives in guiding the reconstruction work. Central authorities unambiguously intended the 'restored' Quarter to legitimate Israeli rule over Jerusalem and to embody a particular vision of Zionism. Ricca contrasts the expurgated and exaggerated heritage narrative of continuity, which served as the guiding principle of the reconstruction, with the considerably more complex and modest history of the Jewish presence and influence on the urban fabric of the Old City. Chapter 2 analyses the legal system that allowed the expropriation and takeover of an expanded Jewish Quarter and the overlapping architectural and archaeological imaginations, which were at the basis of the reconstruction. Chapters 3 and 4 offer detailed examinations of the concrete architectural and urban design strategies and projects in light of their specific social, economic and political circumstances. Ricca's case studies of the Western Wall Plaza, the Hurva Synagogue and Cardo area reveal ideological and economic contradictions, shortcomings in the technical approach taken by Israeli architects to conservation, as well as the damage done to Arab, primarily Islamic heritage. Chapter 5 deals with Israel's largely successful circumvention of UNESCO and international legal and conservation norms in its heritage stewardship of Jerusalem. Chapter 6 broadens the scope of the analysis to other historic centres in Israel/Palestine and the Middle East, revealing some common trends, as well as the unique characteristics and complexities of the situation in Jerusalem.

The major finding of the book is the extent to which the central government dictated the ideological meaning of the reconstruction project, which frequently stood in direct contradiction to internationally accepted conservation practices and notions of world heritage. The importance of the state and national legitimating strategies in most if not all, urban restoration projects is equally evident from Ricca's comparative material, even if Jerusalem stands out as an extreme case. In light of the evidence presented it is difficult to disagree with Ricca's central contention that the Jewish Quarter as it stands today is not the result of a process of restoration or conservation, despite the positive acclaim it has received in architectural journals. Instead the Quarter can be seen as the construction of an enclave with strong nationalist overtones, designed as a showcase for both an Israeli and an international, western audience, which serves to undermine and partly erase the Palestinian, Islamic narrative and heritage of the city. A further insight produced in this book, is the way the rebuilding of the Jewish Quarter has also failed in some its basic ideological motivations. The state had intended the project to offer a synthesis of religious and secular strands of Israeli identity, yet today the ultra-orthodox and religious far right have effectively taken over the Quarter, leading to yet a more exclusive understanding of Jewish national heritage.

On one point Ricca's rigorous analysis could be said to overstate the unique rupture the Jewish Quarter presents in the 'organic' growth of Jerusalem's Old City through history. Ricca somewhat minimises the impact of western imperial urbanism on Jerusalem from the nineteenth century. Yet this influence was not restricted merely to the ostentatious erection of institutions and religious foundations in inappropriate

national styles; it also fundamentally altered the very understanding of the city and the relationship between its historic and new parts. British purist notions of sacred space and how to adequately conserve it, exercised a powerful influence over Israeli planning in the Old City Basin as a whole. The current transformation of Silwan into the Jewish heritage enclave of David City, south of the Old City owes as much to the model of the Jewish Quarter, as to British anti-urban visions of Jerusalem as a reified, sacred park, rather than as a living city.

The question of how to assess the Jewish Quarter in relation to the wider history of colonial urbanisation in no way diminishes the achievements of this book, which presents a significant contribution to the field, and is set to act as a reference on the politics of Israeli architecture.

Maximilian Gwiazda is employed as a researcher on the 'Conflict in Cities' project in the Department of Architecture at Cambridge University and is an academic associate of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

Endnotes

- 1 See for example W. Pullan. 2006. 'Locating the Civic in the Frontier: Damascus Gate.' In *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, M. Miessen & S. Basar, eds., pp.109-22 Cambridge Mass and London: MIT Press and Frankfurt: Revolver; A. Nitzan-Shifan. 2005. 'Capital City or Spiritual Centre? The Politics of Architecture in Post-1967 Jerusalem.' *Cities* 22, no. 3: pp.229-40; E. Weizman. 2007. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. London: Verso; and H. Yacobi. 2009. *The Jewish-Arab City: Spatio-Politics in a Mixed Community*. (London: Routledge).