

Transforming the Face of the Holy City: Political Messages in the Built Topography of Jerusalem (part 2 of 2)

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III

In the panorama of Jerusalem today, numerous contrasts leap to the eye. Perhaps the most striking is that between the usually blue sky and the light-colored local stone of which Jerusalem has always been



built, and which has always reflected the bright sun, luminating holy areas like the Haram al-Sharif.¹ This contrast between stone and sky is a feature of the city which has been manifest for many centuries: we know that it has certainly been the case since the beginning of the Islamic era, and it was undoubtedly also the case before. It was picked up and amplified visually by some of the city's great master builders through their impressive use of blue and gold—the colors of sky and sun—in the Dome of the Rock, and perhaps in earlier structures.²

But there is another contrast which is immediately apparent to the viewer today. This is the troubling disjuncture between the older structures in the city, in particular the traditional Islamic fabric of the built topography of the Old City, surrounded by superb walls built in the 16th century by the greatest of the Ottoman Sultans, Sulayman, and the newer, mainly Israeli, modern buildings which march along the hilltops on the horizon. There is a certain

¹ A British ordinance dating from the beginning of the Mandate and maintained in force by all regimes since then has ensured that only stone, or at least stone facings, should be used in Jerusalem buildings, preserving the city from some of the hideous combinations which concrete and other materials have made possible in the modern era. See *Orientalisms* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1945), the memoirs of Ronald Storrs, the British Military Governor of Jerusalem responsible for the ordinance, p. 310. Storrs wrote (p. 440) that "There are many positions of greater authority and renown within and without the British Empire, but in a sense that I cannot explain there is no promotion after Jerusalem."

² Josephus' account of the destruction of Herod's temple points to the utilization of large quantities of gold, silver and brass throughout: *The Jewish War*, pp. 343 ff.

harmony with the site and with each other of the weathered stone buildings of the Mameluke and Ottoman eras, which constitute the bulk of what is visible in the Old City, together with a plethora of earlier Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Crusader and Ayyubid structures. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, of much of the built topography outside the walls of the Old City dating from the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods.

Among the graceful villas, government and commercial structures, and apartment buildings outside the walls in Arab neighborhoods like Sheikh Jarrah, Ras al-'Amud and Silwan, formerly Arab neighborhoods like Talbiyyeh, Baq'a and Qatamon, and in the many older Jewish neighborhoods to the west and north-west of the Old City, there are certainly a number of indifferent, undistinguished, and unimpressive pieces of architecture.³ But by their generally modest height (few are over two or three stories high), their use of rough or finished stone in traditional ways, and their responsiveness to the terrain, these buildings seem to have an integral connection with the rectangular medieval Old City which is at the core of Jerusalem.

None of this is true of the structures erected by Israel since 1967, especially the residential areas for Israelis—called settlements by the Arabs and neighborhoods by the Israelis—built in the

³ See the work of David Kroyanker, notably *Jerusalem Architecture-Periods and Styles: Arab Buildings outside the City Walls* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1985), and *Jerusalem Architecture-Periods and Styles: The British Mandate Period, 1918-1948* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1989).

Arab Eastern sector of Jerusalem,⁴ and it is here that the disjuncture is most apparent. These buildings are quite unlike any of those we have just been talking about, most of which seem to have an organic relation to their environment. Instead, some of these new structures look like sentries, some like watchtowers, others like fortresses, set off sharply from the terrain on which they stand. They loom on the horizon, massive, bulky and square, filling space and covering land, often giving the impression of having been dropped onto their sites with no respect for the topography, except for careful attention to the need to be high up, defensible, and in a strategic position.

The contrast could not be plainer with such architectural gems as the city walls built by Sultan Sulayman, and the Haram al-Sharif and the buildings it contains (these include a sequence of Mameluke structures catalogued by Burgoyne⁵ which have not been touched on in this paper, but which brilliantly complete the ensemble of the Haram). This is a contrast between on the one hand an adornment which is meant to attract people, whether adornment of the landscape with a built topography, or the

adornment of specific buildings, and on the other a military austerity, a stark plainness, and a dullness which are manifestly repellent. In fact, in all that Israel has done in East Jerusalem since 1967, perhaps only in three areas can one feel any sense of adornment and an attempt to please the senses rather than the dour and cold efficiency of superior power and strategic necessity. These are the gardens and walks around the newly revealed walls of the Old City⁶; the Western Wall plaza, whose austerity is stark indeed, but nevertheless moving beneath the huge and impressive bulk of the Western Wall of the Herodian temple enclosure; and parts of the renovated Jewish Quarter, with its newly paved streets, archeological discoveries and meticulous appearance. But for the knowledgeable eye, even these three areas represent layer upon layer of meaning, as we shall see.

By contrast, reading the built topography of the Israeli settlement project to the east, north, and south of the Old City in the areas of Jerusalem annexed after 1967, we see clearly that several messages are being conveyed by these new buildings, which are often hideously ugly, with little or no attempt at adornment. The first is that they represent a project which has no respect for place, no sensitivity to the traditions of local architecture, and little concern for the cumulative impact of its energetic efforts on the built topography of the landscape. The Israeli ethos has always gloried in the feats of man over nature, and in man's ability to conquer the environment. To all

⁴ As I point out in "The Future of Arab Jerusalem," in Derek Hopwood, ed., *Studies in Middle Eastern History*, Vol. 2 (London: MacMillans/St. Antony's College, forthcoming), this terminology obscures the fact that much of West Jerusalem used to be Arab, and that in 1948 over 30,000 Palestinians were forced to flee their homes in residential quarters like Talbiyya, Baq'a and Qatamon, and villages like Deir Yassin and 'Ain Karim.

⁵ Burgoyne's *Mamluk Jerusalem* contains both drawings of the individual buildings and a plan of the entire west and north facades of the Haram, which are largely Mameluke.

⁶ This work was begun by Storrs, as described in *Orientalism*, pp. 310 ff.

intents and purposes, the Palestinians are seen as part of this environment, rather as Native Americans were by the American pioneers: a savage force of nature to be overcome as part of the process of civilization. The effect that the last two millennia of habitation have produced on the topography, in the form of extensive agricultural terracing, as well as villages, cities and towns, is seen from this perspective as either somehow unconnected to the current Palestinian inhabitants of the land, or as the ancient traces of the presence of the ancestors of the modern Israelis.

Of course there are significant differences in the ways in which Israelis view the topography of the country. There is indeed a deep divide at the heart of the Zionist project in Palestine, between those who almost mystically revere the land and its connections with the epochal events of Jewish history, and want to preserve it (although they are generally blind to the existence of the Palestinians who have lived on that land for generations and to what they have created), and those who want to master the land, as part of the physical manifestation of their triumph over the Palestinian people who live or have lived on it. The archaeologists and those responsible for the so-called "Green Zones,"⁷ in which construction is

⁷ For a thorough and able analysis of the politics of land use in the Jerusalem area, including the utilization of Green Zones as a weapon against the Palestinians, see Shaul Cohen, *The Politics of Planting: Israeli-Palestinian Competition for Control of Land in the Jerusalem Periphery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), University of Chicago Geography Research Paper no. 236.

forbidden, belong to the one camp, and the settlers, the builders and the planners of the expansion of settlement to the other.⁸ But even the green belts and afforestation zones are meant to serve political purposes. This was apparent from an Israel Lands Authority memo of 1985 about a new forest being planted on the edge of the Arab village of Sur Bahir within the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, cited in his book by Shaul Cohen: "it is not possible today to plant a real forest, rather more of a thin forest *whose principal purpose is the guarding of the area...*[author's italics]."⁹ Needless to say, the area had to be guarded against its Arab inhabitants and their unfortunate proclivity to try to cultivate their own land.

In the administration of the eastern parts of Jerusalem after its occupation in 1967, the then-Israeli Mayor, Teddy Kollek, continued the policy of the former British colonial authority in preventing building on the Mount of Olives, since in its largely un-built state it provided a perfect backdrop against which the Old City could be seen. While this prevented Arab property owners from exercising their rights, it also prevented some of the excesses in terms of property seizures and aesthetic monstrosities which resulted from the

⁸ See Meron Benvenisti's newest book, *Suspended Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California, forthcoming), for some sense of the motivations of the first camp, especially the map-makers, and the dissertation of Nadia Abu El-Hajj, "Excavating the Land, Creating the Homeland: Archaeology, the State and the Making of History in Modern Jewish Nationalism" (Duke University, Department of Cultural Anthropology, 1995), for an examination of the motivations of the archaeologists.

⁹ Cohen, *Politics of Planting*, p. 133.

building of new housing for Israelis in other parts of the occupied eastern sector of the city. Ultimately, however, neither respect for aesthetics nor for property rights prevented Kollek's municipality from eventually using the right of eminent domain to take over and then lease to the Mormon church at vast profit to itself a plot of land near the top of the Mount of Olives whose Palestinian owners had been forbidden from using their own property.¹⁰ A complex of buildings belonging to a Mormon educational institution affiliated to Brigham Young University today stands on the site.

As this example shows, there is no reason to assume that the sainted Teddy Kollek, beloved of liberals the world over, was particularly sympathetic to the Palestinian inhabitants of the city.¹¹ Together with the Israeli government, his administration presided over the post-1967 destruction of the Maghariba Quarter, and the dispossession of its inhabitants, in order to make way for the vast plaza which today stands before the Western Wall; at the same time expelled the Arabs who had taken refuge in the Jewish Quarter after losing their homes in the western part of the city

in 1948; and expropriated the property of Palestinians who had businesses near the walls of the Old City as part of a beautification project which revealed the entire length of the city walls.

While the latter project was both aesthetically justified and did violence mainly to business premises rather than residences, the expulsion of the Arab inhabitants of the Jewish Quarter and the Maghariba Quarter, whatever benefit they may have brought to others, did harm to considerable communities of people. In the former, much damaged and heavily looted in the fighting of 1948, there arose the renovated, much-expanded and Arab-free (by a decision of the Israeli Supreme Court¹²) Jewish Quarter, graced by exclusive shops, high-rise yeshivas, and expensive housing many of whose new tenants live in the United States most of the time (it is one of the few parts of Jerusalem where English appears to be the second language). In the latter, the hundreds of inhabitants of this centuries-old quarter with its mosques and shrines were simply displaced as the bulldozers moved in, and offered the derisory "compensation" which the Israeli state is so generous in offering when it engages in politico-social human

¹⁰ This land consists of *waqf* property, inalienable Islamic charitable endowments, established over the years by a number of Jerusalem families. Kollek's Jerusalem municipality received \$2 million in return for the 99-year lease, which it in fact had no legal right to grant.

¹¹ For some of the actions perpetrated by Kollek's administration from 1965 until 1994, see the work by his admirer and collaborator for many years (for much of that time as Deputy Mayor), Meron Benvenisti, *Intimate Enemies: Jews and Arabs in a Shared Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 35-44.

¹² This was handed down in the case of Muhammad Sa'id Burgan v. The Minister of the Treasury, The Company for the Restoration of the Jewish Quarter, and the Minister of Housing, decided on 4 July 1978. The Court denied Burgan, a property-owner and former resident of the Jewish Quarter, the right to lease his own house there from the Company, which had taken possession of it and renovated it after it was confiscated from him in 1967, although Burgan had made the highest bid on the property. Only Jews, the Court decided, had the right to live in the Jewish Quarter.

engineering. In place of the Maghariba Quarter, there stands a great plaza, the scene of round-the-clock public devotions before the Western Wall, of major celebrations on Jewish holidays, and of occasional political demonstrations and torchlight graduation ceremonies for elite units of the Israeli army.¹³

In assessing the impact of the changes wrought since 1967 at the Western Wall plaza and in the adjacent Jewish Quarter, and attempting to "read" the ensemble, it must be said that although one effect is an affirmation of the Israeli and Jewish presence in Jerusalem, if need be at the expense of the presence of others, there is less of a disjuncture with the fabric of the Old City which surrounds them than in much else the Israelis state has done in and around Jerusalem since 1967. It is true that some of the newer buildings in the Jewish Quarter, with their bulk and fortress-like aspect, are jarring to the eye. But elsewhere there have been sensitive renovations of old structures (some dating to well before the Jewish Quarter was established in this area sometime during the Ottoman period, probably the 16th or 17th century), and some of the new construction is not out of place in the Old City, where most existing structures are at least 400-500 years old.

Similarly, the exposure of the Western Wall, which was part of the enclosure of Herod's temple, also serves to expose part of the enclosure of the Haram al-Sharif. Just as the newly visible expanse of wall

serves powerfully to remind the viewer of the memory of the one, so does it accentuate for the same viewer the powerful impression of the existing structures in the other. In sum, the contrast between the aspect of the Jewish Quarter and the Western Wall plaza and the primarily Islamic façade of the city is not so great as to be jarring, and in some respects they even complement each other. The same sadly cannot be said about most of the rest of what has been done by Israel to the built topography in its occupation of East Jerusalem since 1967.

IV

What then are the political implications of 31 years of Israeli efforts to change the built topography of East Jerusalem? We have touched on some of them, but others remain obscure. One clear implication of these efforts has been the reinforcement of the existing institutionalized inequality between Jews and Arabs in the Holy City. All the buildings we have been talking about on the hills surrounding Jerusalem to the north, east, and south are intended exclusively for the use of Israelis. A variety of housing subsidies are available to Israelis only: most of them are restricted to Jews alone through devices like basing eligibility for loans or subsidies on army service, or through overt Jewish National Fund restrictions on sales and leasing of property to non-Jews. As a result of these means, as many as 180,000 Israelis have been induced to settle in this new housing in East Jerusalem since 1967.

During the same period, the Arab population of East Jerusalem has grown as well, maintaining its proportion of the total

¹³ For more details on what happened to both the Jewish Quarter and Maghariba Quarter, see R. Khalidi, "The Future of Arab Jerusalem."

population of the city as a whole at between 28 and 30 percent. But unlike the 180,000 Israeli Jews in East Jerusalem, the Palestinians enjoy neither governmental subsidies nor are they allowed to build new housing to keep up with natural population growth. A variety of transparently discriminatory mechanisms are utilized to ban or limit Arab building, including absurdly restrictive zoning restrictions and the demolition of homes. Between 1967 and 1980 and between 1982 and 1987, over 540 Arab homes were destroyed by the Israeli authorities¹⁴; since the signing of the Oslo accords in September of 1993, another 101 have been demolished.¹⁵ These were mainly destroyed because they were "illegally built" (i.e. built without almost impossible to obtain building permits), or in a few cases because of alleged security offenses by one of their residents. Needless to say, homes owned by Jews are never subject to demolition in this fashion, whether or not they have permits, or for any other reason.

The net result has been that the buildings we see marching across the tops and sides of the hills around Jerusalem are reserved exclusively for Israelis. Arabs have great difficulty building new housing, little or no land is zoned for Arab construction, and Arabs thus must live in often dilapidated housing restricted to small islands within

the overall area of East Jerusalem. The rest is reserved for Israelis: over 40 percent of the area annexed to West Jerusalem in 1967 has been confiscated from private Arab owners for the establishment of these Israeli settlements and other facilities which benefit Israelis only, while vast additional areas are green zones not zoned for building.¹⁶ This is only one of many palpable forms of gross discrimination against Arabs in Jerusalem since 1967: Meron Benvenisti notes that in 1986 only 3 percent of the city's development budget was spent on the Arab sector, and in 1990 only 2.6 percent.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this form of discrimination involves the most direct political implications of perhaps the most striking feature of the built topography of Jerusalem: the Israeli settlements which loom on the hills around it.

Another implication of the changes in the urban landscape wrought by the Israeli occupation of its eastern part in 1967 is that Jerusalem has become the primary frontier of the Zionist project at the turn of the century. While peopling the land within a specific strategic configuration (along the coast from Jaffa to Haifa, south from Haifa to Beisan, and then up the finger of eastern Galilee, in the shape of an N) was the frontier of the first era of Zionism before 1948; and while taking full control of the vast new areas conquered from the Palestinians and the Arab armies during the 1948 war was the main frontier of the 1948-1967 period; since 1967 there have been contradictory impulses as far as the

¹⁴ These fragmentary statistics are derived from figures compiled by the Arab Studies Society in Jerusalem and Amnesty International, and cited in Issa Nakhleh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Palestine Problem* (New York: Intercontinental Books, 1991), pp. 576-583.

¹⁵ According to figures compiled by the American Committee on Jerusalem in Washington, DC: *The Jerusalem Monitor*, 2, 7, July 1998, pp. 1, 6.

¹⁶ Benvenisti, *Intimate Enemies*, p. 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

colonization of what remains of Palestine is concerned. On one side have stood those who called for the absorption of the entirety of the West Bank—Judea and Samaria in their parlance—as well as the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. On the other were those arguing for a "Zionism of quality," which would have divested Israel of most of the occupied territories and their millions of Arabs in order to keep the Jewish state Jewish. It is unclear which of these two trends will win out in the end, but it is apparent that while there is division among Israelis over settlement elsewhere, there is a relatively high degree of consensus over the need to settle—and thereby master—Arab East Jerusalem.¹⁸

This means that irrespective of all else, whether Israeli political divisions, Palestinian efforts, or the outcome of the cruelly misnamed "peace process," the dynamic which has created a panorama of Israeli settlements all around the horizon of Jerusalem is extremely likely to continue. Palestinian efforts to resist this process, or to play an active role in shaping the city's built topography, which have not been particularly noticeable or vigorous over the past 31 years, could certainly slow this process, as well as exposing it to world public opinion for what it is. At the same time, largely independent of any political effort on their part, the Palestinians in Jerusalem have been relatively successful

¹⁸ Regarding this matter, however, see the forthcoming book by Jerome Segal, *Negotiating Jerusalem*, to be published by the State University of New York Press in 1999, which shows on the basis of extensive survey data that Israelis have very different degrees of attachment to different parts of East Jerusalem.

on the demographic level, in spite of the Israeli policies aimed at decreasing the Arab population of the city. This means that in spite of all the changes which Israel has wrought in the city's appearance over the past three decades, it has not succeeded in changing the basic equation it inherited in 1967 as far as the city's population is concerned: just under 30 percent of the total are still Arabs.

What Israel has succeeded in doing, however, via its conquest and annexation of East Jerusalem and its subsequent building of a ring of stone around the city is to follow the precedent set first for the Muslims by the Caliph Mu'awiyya, and in earlier ages by Roman and Byzantine emperors, by Herod, and probably by King Solomon before them: that "of identifying Jerusalem with the legitimization of authority, above and beyond whatever pious meanings were involved with the city."¹⁹ Israel has successfully done that by using its power to invest not just in propaganda, the promotion of tourism, and myriad means of emphasizing its authority in the country via its control of Jerusalem. Beyond all of this, it has used that power to shape the city's built topography as a powerful and lasting symbol of its exclusive political authority in Jerusalem.

If the Palestinians are to dispute this exclusivity, and to have a chance of claiming their rightful share of Jerusalem, they will of course need more power than they have today. But if they are to be successful they will have to use that power—and can indeed even now utilize

¹⁹ Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, p. 50.

the extensive assets they currently control, for example via the wholesale renovation and preservation of the many hundreds of ancient Arab-owned buildings within the Old City—to legitimize their authority and their standing in the same way as have all the preceding regimes which have made a lasting mark in Jerusalem: they will have to do this by writing on the landscape in stone, in buildings, and thereby affecting the built topography of this ancient city.

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