The Unbuilt Parliament

British Colonial Plans for a Legislative Assembly in Jerusalem

Yair Wallach
and Julio Moreno Cirujano

Abstract
The deliberations over the establishment of a legislative assembly in Mandatory Palestine have long been dismissed by the historiography as one of many failed ideas of the Mandate. Yet the legislative assembly was not a mere concept thrown around in pointless rounds of negotiations; it was also an architectural project that came remarkably close to being built, involving several plots of land in Jerusalem, countless architectural drawings, and clay models, designed primarily by the Mandate’s celebrated architect Austen St. Barbe Harrison. The legislative assembly chamber was, as of the early 1930s, a central element in the design of the central government offices – the most ambitious unfulfilled scheme of the British Mandatory Palestine government in Jerusalem, aiming to accommodate all executive and legislative bodies in a single building. The deliberations over the scheme remained restricted to the top echelons of the Palestine government, with no involvement of Arab Palestinians or Jews. The project, which was derailed and revived several times in the 1930s and 1940s, was finally abandoned only in early November 1947. The project and its design throw new light on colonial state-making in Palestine and its flaws.

Keywords
British Mandate Palestine; Jerusalem; legislative assembly; architectural history; urban planning; Austen St. Barbe Harrison; Arab Revolt; colonial architecture.
Introduction

Next Saturday Britain terminates her mandate over Palestine, and the present is therefore an appropriate moment to reproduce Austen St. B. Harrison’s design for a central group of Government buildings near Jerusalem . . . When the partition of the country between the Arab inhabitants and the Jewish immigrants was decided, the project (which included a general legislative assembly) became obsolete. This partition scheme has been abandoned, but even if some central government emerges from the present chaos, it is unlikely that this project will ever be realized.¹

On 13 May 1948, two days before the British Mandate high commissioner left Palestine, the Architects’ Journal published the plans and images of the model for Palestine’s central government offices (CGO) and legislative assembly. The piece, under the title “Abandoned Work,” appeared alongside adverts for flooring material and an article on a conversion project in Eaton Square. This was the final resting place of a twenty-five-year project that had incurred significant costs in purchased land and architectural fees, and involved endless deliberations, several potential sites, and at least four developed architectural schemes. Its failure was far from a foregone conclusion. It was, in the words of one of its architects, a “Jack-in-the-box” project, which accompanied the Mandate from its very beginning to its very end, jumping out at key moments only to be put back into the box.² From 1935 to the mid-1940s the project vacillated between moving steadily and confidently towards construction and, in other moments, languishing or put on hold.

Of all the unfulfilled schemes of the British Mandatory Palestine Government in Jerusalem, the construction of central government offices was undoubtedly the most ambitious, expensive, and time consuming. Officials began discussing it even before
the 1922 approval of the Mandate and continued to work on it until November 1947, months before Britain’s departure from Palestine. The failure to build the CGO cost the British dearly, in expenditure for rented offices, in government efficiency, and in human lives, as they discovered when the poorly secured King David Hotel was bombed by Jewish insurgents. The failure also cast a long shadow on the memory and understanding of Mandate Palestine. The absence of central government headquarters, and even more so, the absence of a legislative assembly building, made it much easier to pretend that a unitary Palestine never existed, that partition was always the natural and inevitable outcome of the Mandate, and that representative politics had always been impossible.
Our interest here is in the legislative assembly chamber, and in what we can learn from the unbuilt building about the political and constitutional history of Mandate Palestine. The legislative assembly is typically described in the historiography as a doomed prospect, one of the Mandate’s many cul-de-sacs.\textsuperscript{3} Few historians studied the deliberations over the legislative council in detail, and those who did, were apparently unaware of the extensive planning activity for the actual construction of an assembly hall.\textsuperscript{4} The central government offices project received virtually no interest beyond a few architectural historians. The only detailed discussion is found in Ron Fuchs’s unpublished PhD thesis in Hebrew on the British architect Austen St. Barbe Harrison.\textsuperscript{5} Fuchs’s focus is on Harrison’s architectural œuvre, but his thoughtful analysis pays attention to political and symbolic dimensions.\textsuperscript{6}

Palestine’s status as a Class A Mandate (that is, sufficiently “advanced”) required the British to facilitate the establishment of self-governing institutions, as was the case in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Throughout British rule, the native Arab Palestinian majority demanded representative institutions with powers over immigration and land: they called for a local government with executive powers, answerable to an elected parliament.\textsuperscript{7} However, this was at odds with British commitment to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. The Zionist leadership strongly opposed the development of representative institutions with real powers, at least as long as Jews were in a minority.

A legislative council was first suggested in 1922 by High Commissioner Herbert Samuel, and its constitution ensured a majority of British and Zionist members. The plan was blocked by a successful Palestinian boycott of the elections. In the 1930s, High Commissioner Wauchope put forward a modified proposal with tentative support from the Arab leadership, but the Zionist leadership was able to scuttle the plan in the UK parliament in early 1936. This failure was followed by the Arab Revolt and the 1937 partition plan recommended by the Peel Commission. The 1939 White Paper charted a path towards a binational state, with an appointed assembly that would be later replaced with an elected one. Such an assembly never convened.

The history of the unbuilt assembly hall sheds new light on this political timeline. It reveals that the legislative assembly was not a mere concept thrown around in pointless rounds of negotiations; it also referred to real plots of land in Jerusalem, countless architectural drawings, and several clay models. Throughout much of the 1930s and 1940s, British officials in Palestine regarded the establishment of a legislative assembly a realistic and necessary prospect. By 1935, the assembly hall became a key design element in the flagship central government offices, so much that when the British government withdrew its support of a legislative assembly, the entire project was derailed. Even more surprising is British commitment to building an assembly hall in 1939. While the White Paper’s constitutional proposals have long been dismissed as purely theoretical, we show that in late 1939 an assembly hall was very close to being built; and that in the 1940s, it was planned once again as an integral part of the CGO, in a larger and more prestigious location. The underlying assumption behind these deliberations was that Palestine was to remain a unitary, undivided
state, and that its political and constitutional future inevitably demanded some kind of a representative assembly in Jerusalem. And yet throughout, the planning of the assembly hall remained a British affair, with no involvement or consultation with Arabs or Jews. The plans to incorporate the assembly hall into a government building complex reflected the subordination of local representation to colonial design.

**From the Ottoman Serai to Early British Plans for Central Government Offices**

In the final decades of Ottoman rule, the regional government operated from the Serai (Turkish, saray, palace) in al-Wad area within Jerusalem’s walls. This was a large fourteenth century Mamluk complex renovated for this purpose in 1870, shortly before the establishment of the mutasarrifate (independent district) of Jerusalem. The Serai, the seat of the governor and his staff, also served for the meetings of the district administrative council (meclis-i idare), a partly elected executive and representative body. The location deep inside the walled city became inconvenient as the city expanded beyond the walls, and the commercial and civic city center shifted to Jaffa Gate. After 1900, the Sublime Porte planned to move the Serai to a location closer to the new civic heart of the city, and considered a site in Nikoforiya, west of Jaffa Gate (donated by the Greek Orthodox Church). During World War I, when Jerusalem became a regional command center, the military government moved to buildings outside the walls, such as the Notre Dame – a large French Catholic guesthouse north of the walled city, and the Augusta Victoria, a German Protestant pilgrims’ guesthouse on the Mount of Olives. With the 1917 occupation of Jerusalem, Augusta Victoria became the residence of British military commanders and, after 1920, of High Commissioner Herbert Samuel. In the immediate term, government departments were housed in rented buildings around Jerusalem.

The construction of the central government offices was first suggested on 20 July 1922 – two days before formal approval of the Palestine Mandate by the League of Nations. The architect who was chosen to design the project was the Department of Public Works’ senior architect, Austen St. Barbe Harrison, who had arrived in Palestine in 1921 and would later become the most influential British architect in Mandatory Palestine. The main motivation for the project was economic: “It would be difficult to continue to justify an expenditure of over £3,000 per annum upon hired premises,” wrote the director of public works. This expenditure was set to grow much higher during the Mandate, but the disadvantages of rented accommodation went far beyond costs. Rented premises required significant modifications to make them fit for purpose, and they provided no long-term horizon as leases could be terminated. Departments soon outgrew their offices. Moving departments across the city was a relatively common episode, and sometimes even a source of rivalries between heads of departments. The dispersal of departments across the city made internal communication cumbersome. These considerations of cost and efficiency were, initially, the main motivation for
the central government offices project. Security, political and symbolic considerations entered the discussion at a much later stage.

Exactly around that time (1921–23), British policy makers were occupied with plans for a legislative council for Palestine, but there was no plan to accommodate the council as part of the new central offices. A central element in Samuel’s proposed constitution for Palestine, the legislative council was due to replace the advisory council of British officials and appointed Arab and Jewish representatives, which had first convened in October 1920.\textsuperscript{16} The new council was to include ten British officials, and twelve elected representatives – eight Muslims, two Christians and two Jews. In a marked departure from Ottoman electoral practice, the British created separate confessional electoral registers for Muslims, Christians, and Jews – similar to British policies in India. The advisory council had been meeting in the High Commissioner’s residence in the Augusta Victoria, and the legislative council would have likely convened there as well.\textsuperscript{17} The absence of plans for a dedicated council hall was an indication of the council’s subordinate position and limited powers. The council could not challenge the policies related to the Jewish national home; its makeup ensured British and Zionist representatives had a permanent majority, even though Arab Muslims and Christians made up 90 percent of the population. The Arab Executive rejected the plan and organized a boycott of the elections – the first successful Palestine-wide mobilization against the Mandate. The council never convened, and the advisory council similarly collapsed in 1923.

The central government office project progressed slowly in the 1920s. An olive grove plot was identified in east Nikoforiya, in the same area that was marked by the Ottomans for a government building and quite likely the same plot. The site was close to the Mamilla pool, on Nikoforiya Road, which was renamed “Julian’s Way” in the British street-naming campaign of the 1920s (and after 1948, renamed again “King David Street”).\textsuperscript{18} The plot was not very large and its topographic location in the valley slope was not particularly impressive; it did not offer much view of the Old City, despite its vicinity. However, it was close to the city center of Jaffa Gate and Mamilla Street, and the Nikoforiya area developed considerably in the 1920s, with monumental new buildings such as the YMCA, and the Jewish/Egyptian-owned King David Hotel, just south of the CGO plot. The Supreme Muslim Council’s flagship project, the Palace Hotel, was also built nearby. Today, the former CGO plot is the site of the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College (the seminary of the U.S. Reform Judaism movement), built by Safdie Architects in 1998.

Only in 1929 did the project take a serious turn, and planning started in earnest. Departments were not trusted to provide overall estimates of their office space needs, and were required to prepare detailed and comprehensive schedules detailing staff according to role, seniority, and office needs.\textsuperscript{19} As Fuchs writes, the futile attempt to achieve comprehensive overview over all the necessary details from so many departments introduced enormous complexity and chronic delays. Given the slow and interrupted pace of planning and approval stages, and due to the changing needs of a steadily expanding government, the data quickly became obsolete and had to be
recollected. The project files in the Israel State Archives hold hundreds of pages of such schedules, from the 1920s to the 1940s. Similarly counterproductive was the attempt to accommodate all departments in one large building; had the project been divided into several buildings, it is much likelier that some of it would have been realized. A list of departments to be included in the new offices was first decided in 1922, consisting of the high commissioner’s office, the secretariat, the treasury, legal departments, audit, department of education, land, health, agriculture, and surveys. However, the list was in constant flux and would frequently change as departments were added and taken off the list, according to budgetary adjustments and available space. The government offices were never a stable and well-defined object, and the requirements of the building (in both functional and symbolic terms) kept shifting, as architects struggled to keep pace with changing government priorities. In that sense, the architects were active participants in repeatedly failed attempts to define the very meaning of the Palestine government and to give it an architectural shape.

The Legislative Assembly

An assembly hall was first incorporated as an optional element into the design of the central government offices in 1930. Passfield’s White Paper (1930) stipulated the establishment of a legislative assembly as part of profound rethinking of the terms of the Mandate. Even after Prime Minister McDonald reversed the White Paper’s restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchasing, the commitment to a legislative assembly remained in place, allowing British officials in Palestine to push in that direction, despite lack of enthusiasm from the Colonial Office in London.

The historiography of the Mandate typically dismisses the 1930s deliberations over a legislative assembly as doomed propositions. “No one wanted a council: both Jews and Arabs were striving for victory, not compromise,” notes Tom Segev. Rashid Khalidi writes that these proposals were “fatally compromised” from an Arab perspective, as they involved accepting the terms of the Mandate, which “enshrined their inferior status by comparison with that of the Jews.” However, as Ann Lesch and Yehoshua Porath have shown, in the 1930s the Arab leadership was open to compromises, while it continued to advocate for an elected assembly with full powers. The assembly was seen as an avenue for Palestinian participatory representation and formal interaction with the British, with hope that the assembly’s powers would expand to include the key issues of immigration and land. At the same time, Zionist opposition to the idea hardened, fearing that it would lead to restrictions on immigration. From the British side, the legislative assembly appeared a way to mitigate and manage Arab opposition to the Mandate – opposition which, officials feared, could take a violent form. The prolonged lack of any self-governing institutions was a break with Ottoman practices, and in regional terms Palestine was fast becoming an outlier. By the mid-1920s, Egypt was nominally independent and had a fully elected parliament; Iraq, under a British Mandate, had an elected council of representatives; in Syria, a new parliament was convened in 1932, with a new building dedicated for this purpose in Damascus.
In 1931, the government architect compiled a list of open questions regarding the central government offices project. The assembly hall came ninth on the list – appearing after questions about the messengers’ system, cloakrooms, and lavatories, indicative at that point of the low priority of the legislative assembly as part of the project. Harrison’s early designs (the “Square Scheme”) took the shape of a large, almost square building to which the assembly hall was added rather unconvincingly at the back. The assembly was first introduced as a boardroom, then as an enlarged semispherical building in the back of the building. Meanwhile, the entire CGO project stalled between 1932 and 1934 because of the global depression.

However, in late 1934, after many delays caused by Zionist objections, High Commissioner Wauchope decided that the time was right to push for the assembly’s establishment, and received the backing of the British government. The need to accommodate the assembly was the reason Harrison recommended the expansion of the site by purchasing a nearby plot. Around that time Harrison abandoned the “Square Scheme,” and proposed a new design, the “Round Scheme,” in which the assembly took a much more prominent place, as the very heart in the complex. But it remained something which “may or may not be built.” Only in June 1935, in a face-to-face conversation with the chief secretary, Harrison received final confirmation for the inclusion of an assembly hall and the exact requirements, some recorded only in handwriting. This is striking compared to the discussions on other aspects of the CGO – discussed in lengthy correspondence with various stakeholders. When it came to the assembly, deliberations were conducted in a very small group, which consisted of the high commissioner, chief secretary, director of public works, the architect, and few other high-level officials. There was
no consultation whatsoever with Arab or Jewish stakeholders. While the constitutional questions around the legislative assembly were debated intensely, in public and behind the scenes, among Arab Palestinians and the Jewish Yishuv, it appears that no Arabs or Jews were aware that an assembly hall was in advanced stages of planning. The announcement of the CGO project in the official gazette, reported in Arabic and Hebrew, did not mention the assembly, and did not attract interest or controversy.33

The internal design of the assembly hall, determined by Harrison, was a “well” shape – that is, an elongated, semi-elliptical theater, organized around a central table (where interpreters and clerks would sit) and a throne for the high commissioner. The hall was to accommodate a maximum of thirty members, with space for assistants behind official members.34 The assembly building also included offices for the executive council, clerk of the council, interpreters, and typists (nine offices in total); two committee rooms; a retiring room for the council president; a common room for members (with lavatory); and a gallery for the press and the general public.35

In the second half of 1935, as Harrison was finalizing his design, Wauchope formally presented his plan to the Arab and the Jewish leaderships. Based on his perception of success on the municipal councils of mixed towns, he proposed a legislative council with a total of twenty-eight members: eleven Muslim members (eight elected, three appointed); seven Jewish members (three elected, four appointed); and three Christian members (two elected, one appointed). Additionally, there would be two commercial members and five appointed government officers (British, at least initially). The council would have the same jurisdiction as the 1922 proposed constitution (no powers over immigration and land) and the high commissioner would have veto powers. This was a far cry from Arab Palestinian demands for a representative assembly with full powers, but the makeup was more favorable to the Arabs, who constituted at least half of the council’s members. There was a sense of urgency in obtaining official form for Palestinian representation in government, however constrained.36 This proposal met with complete rejection on the Jewish side. The Zionist leadership had previously floated “parity” schemes with equal representation for Jews and Arabs. Now they refused any form of legislative council. Nazi persecution of German Jews, and antisemitism in Poland, propelled mass Jewish immigration to Palestine, hardening the Zionist position on these issues and making the Zionist leadership’s hopes for a Jewish majority in Palestine seem within reach.37 Elements in the Arab leadership, on the other hand, were cautiously positive. Although noncommittal, there were signs that the Arab leadership was ready to accept the scheme and was negotiating to improve the offer. This was certainly Wauchope’s impression. On 22 December 1935, the Palestine government proclaimed the establishment of the Legislative Council. The New York Times reported that the Zionists failed to block the initiative.38 “[A]fter more than fifteen years of rule by British officials, and despite the limited powers of the Council, a definite step is being made toward the main objective set up by the League of Nations for the Class A mandates of Iraq, Syria and Palestine, namely, the development of self-governing institutions,” wrote the journal Current History in February 1936.39
Such enthusiasm, however, was premature. In February 1936, the plan met with overwhelming opposition in the British House of Lords and, a month later, in the House of Commons. Effective Zionist lobbying galvanized overwhelming opposition to the plan. By March and April, Arab parties began to voice publicly their support for the initiative, but it was too late. In political terms, the legislative assembly notion was dead. Arthur Wauchope was dismayed by these developments, and he warned London that Arab riots were imminent. But he understood the decision was irreversible. Less than a week later, he instructed the architect to drop the assembly hall, unless it could be used for other office purposes. But Harrison’s scheme placed the purposely designed assembly hall at the heart of the entire complex and changing its use to offices made no sense. Harrison pointed out that the space of the legislative assembly forms “the connecting link” between the building’s two wings. Having positioned the assembly hall as the focal node of the entire building, pulling it out was almost impossible. The design had to be rethought.

The Arab leadership was slow to come to terms with the defeat, and continued to seek discussions with British officials. For members of the Istiqlal party, who had opposed the legislative assembly throughout, the failure proved that the only way forward was full non-cooperation. Laila Parsons recently presented the failure of these proposals as the most significant backdrop to the occurrence of the Arab Revolt. By mid-April a general strike had broken out. While Wauchope initially pushed for a downscaled version of the CGO building, at the cost of £120,000, this was derailed by the outbreak of the Arab Revolt. In 1937, after the Royal Commission recommended the partition of Palestine and the termination of the Mandate, there was little point in building central government offices, let alone a legislative assembly. The project was formally put on hold in August 1937.

The Revolt and Its Aftermath: The Death and Resurrection of the Assembly

While the Arab Revolt threw the plans into disarray, it introduced a new motivation to build a central government headquarters: security. The government’s most important departments – the secretariat, the attorney general and the treasury – were housed in St. Paul’s Hospice (Paulus-Haus), near Damascus Gate, in what was a predominantly Arab area, and was seen as unsafe, particularly for Jewish staff and women. Government departments moved from there to several other locations including the Palace Hotel and the King David Hotel, in what was seen as a temporary measure. The King David Hotel rent was 3,200 Palestine pounds each annum, considerably higher than St. Paul’s Hospice (1,950 Palestine pounds). In 1938, as the British government abandoned the idea of partition, there was urgency in finding permanent and secure accommodation. The “Jack-in-the-box” CGO project was ready to leap once more to the top of the colonial priority list.

After the 1937 suspension of the project, Harrison abruptly left Palestine in 1938.

[ 78 ] The Unbuilt Parliament | Yair Wallach and Julio Moreno Cirujano
A contributing factor was his uneasy relationship with Wauchope, who handed a key government commission – the Haifa Government Hospital – to a private architect, the world-famous Erich Mendelsohn, who had fled Nazi Germany and had been living in Jerusalem since 1935. Mendelsohn approached the Mandatory government offering his services to plan the new central government offices, but it was the government’s new senior architect, Percy Winter, who had already been placed in charge of the project. Winter embarked on a completely new design, with a somber square-shaped structure. Given the escalating revolt and the political uncertainty, the legislative assembly appeared irrelevant and is not mentioned in the correspondence.

In March 1939, however, Winter received new instructions to include a legislative assembly chamber as part of the design. The context of this dramatic U-turn was the preparations for the publication of the White Paper in May 1939. After the costly suppression of the Arab Revolt, and as war in Europe appeared increasingly likely, the British government moved to conciliate Arab public opinion in Palestine and neighboring states with restrictions on Jewish immigration and settlement. The White Paper set out a roadmap towards Palestinian self-rule as a unitary binational state within a decade. While an elected assembly seemed premature, Arabs and Jews (according to their share of population) would be appointed to head all government departments. The enlarged executive council composed of these appointed officials would convene regularly as an advisory council, leading eventually to an elected legislature. A committee was set up to finalize the preparations for the building of the CGO, with special attention to the accommodation of the advisory and the executive councils. As before, the discussion remained confidential and involved only a small number of high-level colonial officials.

The architect was taken aback by this development. “This request so radically changes the conception of the building . . . that the proper and most satisfactory course would seem to be to scrap the present plan and to begin anew,” Winter wrote. A legislative assembly must have “dignity and effect” and it was unrealistic – and inappropriate – to incorporate the hall into the existing plan. The difficulty was how to “harmonise the two main elements of the scheme, which appear at first to be in conflict. The Council Chamber unit is the lesser in size and area, but it should not appear subservient to the main block containing the Government offices.” The conflict, of course, was not only between two architectural elements, but also between a colonial government and the colonized local population whose rebellion had just been crushed. The contrast between the liberal values embodied in a legislative hall, and the realities of colonial rule, could not be starker. Winter understood that the architecture must give the council at least a semblance of independent standing and stature. His ideal solution was to place the assembly at the heart of the complex, or alternatively, build it in a different site altogether. However, given the urgency of this long-delayed project, and the need to use the existing plot, Winter suggested to allocate a separate wing for the assembly chamber at the entrance to the compound and, by implication, to provide it with a level of independence and its own standing. Yet the assembly wing, which echoed the aesthetics of the main block on a smaller scale, looked like an ancillary and
docile body attached to the executive core of the Mandate government. Winter added cautiously that his proposal allowed the construction of the project in stages, with the main building first, leaving the assembly chamber for a later stage – as the political framework was not yet fully clear.\(^{51}\)
The high commissioner, however, was far more bullish, and appeared convinced that the new constitutional arrangements could be implemented in the immediate future. In June 1939, he pressed London to approve the entire project, his main argument being the need for accommodation for the enlarged executive and advisory councils. Executive meetings were held up to then in the dining room of the high commissioner’s residence, which could not accommodate the enlarged advisory council. The high commissioner argued that the assembly hall should be built as a separate wing for political reasons, alluding to the foreshadowed “constitutional development,” that is, the future transformation of the advisory council into a legislature. It appears that it was important to communicate the independent standing of the council.

The assembly chamber was a small rectangular building, with a main assembly hall for twenty-eight members (the size remained identical to the 1935 plan). Further detailed requirements included an “ante-room” for the high commissioner; consultation rooms for the chief secretary, attorney general, and the treasurer; offices for clerks, typists, and translators; two committee rooms; a library; a tearoom – opening to a private members’ terrace; a press gallery (at least twelve seats); a public gallery (no less than forty seats); air-conditioning; and lavatories. Unlike in 1935, when a single common room was planned for all council members regardless of faith and ethnicity, the members’ common room was now to be divided in two: a room for Arab members, and a room for Jewish members. The rigid separation between the Arab and Jewish populations was now taken as a given. The binational state, envisaged in the White Paper, was made of two distinct groups, whose representatives were not expected to share the same common room. The 1937 partition plan had been rejected, but the logic of partition was to become entrenched.

Winter dedicated much effort to the design of the assembly in 1939 and again in 1942–43. His writing on the challenges of designing a legislature as part of a government building reflect the most thoughtful considerations of this question found in the archives. Winter believed that his plans avoided “the pretentious, the novel, or the extreme in design and have relied upon dignity, quietness and good proportions.” But his design looked decidedly dull and somber, so much that even the high commissioner pronounced it “rather heavy” and “gaol like.” As Fuchs notes, the elevated compound was separated from the street by a wall that created the impression of a fortress or a prison. The design was vetted by Charles Tegart, the government’s chief security advisor. Indeed, the CGO’s structure and aesthetics dangerously resembled Tegart’s police fortresses that were mushrooming in Palestine to crush any future rural rebellion.

The 1939 White Paper (Peel Commission Report) is usually discussed in relation to policies on Jewish immigration, land purchasing, and settlement. Its constitutional aspect receives little attention, and its formula of a binational state is understood as theoretical in nature: a vague vision that was never translated into practical detail. After all, the White Paper was rejected not only by the Zionists but also by the Arab leadership. While most Arab Higher Committee members were initially inclined to accept it, the mufti’s opposition prevailed. However, it appears that British officials...
were resolved to move ahead, as demonstrated by the detailed planning of the assembly hall, and the robust official commitment to the project. In August 1939, the plan was approved by the colonial secretary, with a budget of £187,000, to include both the main building and the assembly wing. Initial tenders were prepared. It looked as if the building was going ahead. A month later, war was declared in Europe, and priorities quickly shifted. The building of Charles Tegart’s network of police forts, with a budget of £2.2 million, took precedence. The project came to a standstill.

A Final Attempt: The Shift to Legacy

It was not long before the central government offices came back to occupy the attention of British officials. In 1942, as the war’s tide appeared to turn, planning began on the post-war reconstruction of Palestine, involving ambitious investments. The CGO appeared at the top of the priority list. At this point, the tone of the discussion shifted from pure economic and practical considerations, to focus on symbolic dimensions, and the question of architecture became tied with Britain’s prestige in the region. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, deliberations regarding the central offices show no indication that British officials understood the building as a canvas to project a symbolic image of Britain in Palestine. Only in the 1940s, as the end of the Mandate became thinkable, questions of legacy and stature came to the fore. “We should have the noblest group of buildings in the Near East,” wrote the district commissioner Edward Keith Roach in late 1942, recommending the rehiring of Austen St. Barbe Harrison – “the one genius we have had in the Palestine Administration.” Key officials concluded that planning should consider future use of the central offices after the formal end of the British Mandate, in view of “the future of Palestine as a strategic entity,” as well as “the cultural influence which Great Britain will wish to exert in the Near East bearing in mind that Palestine is a focal point.” British officials clearly expected to maintain British influence in Palestine even after the country’s independence, just as they did in Iraq and Egypt.

Given the emphasis on colonial prestige, the chosen site in Julian’s Way now seemed too pedestrian, and an alternative site with commanding views over Jerusalem was sought. As the high commissioner put it: “The building of central government offices in Jerusalem is an inescapable commitment whatever the future may hold and it is incontrovertible that they must be erected on a dignified and commanding site worthy of the privilege position which the British Empire holds in the Holy Land.”

Another consideration was security, which became a key priority in the aftermath of the Arab Revolt. Keith Roach stressed that government offices in scattered buildings around the city were unsafe. He stated that the city is already de facto divided between Jews and Arabs, and the CGO’s location needed to be accessible to both Arabs and Jews, but neither too pronouncedly Arab nor Jewish. While in the late 1930s Arab militants were considered the main risk, in the late 1940s the British faced Jewish insurgency. The King David Hotel, which housed the most important government departments, was a vulnerable target, which the British were unable to protect.
even when they had prior information about Jewish plans to attack it. The security concerns proved well founded in 1946 when the King David Hotel was bombed by the Jewish Irgun, killing ninety-one people. The bombing also hampered planning for the CGO project. Detailed documentation of accommodation needs of government departments were destroyed, and the chief secretary had to request departments to resend the schedules, causing further delays. The destruction of the ill-suited King David headquarters illustrated the urgent need for purpose-built government offices, but now the plans were literally buried in rubble.

![Diagram of Julian's Way proposed site and nearby alternative](image)

Figure 6. Julian’s Way proposed site and nearby alternative, suggested by district commissioner Keith Roach (1944); ISA, 1947 000ndgv – Site of New Government Office, Jerusalem, 1947, 14.

An impressive new site was identified, Karm al-Ruhban (the monks’ vineyard), with splendid views of the Old City, and close to the bourgeois neighborhoods of Qatamun and Talbiyya (Arab), and Rehavia (Jewish). Suddenly, money was not an issue. “To the dignity of Government it was not too much to pay £459,000 for the Qatamun site.” After all, “[t]he Central Offices should be in the nature of a permanent monument in Jerusalem to the Mandatory.”

The reconstruction commissioner publicly criticized the operation of virtually all government institutions from private accommodation “almost grotesquely unsuitable for the purpose which they are now required to serve.” Government departments were “scattered widely over the town” in a “vast number” of leased properties, which created confusion, lack of coordination and a waste of time.” In the twenty-five years of British rule, there had been a “failure to undertake anything but the minimum construction which an orderly and well regulated Government might be expected to provide.”
But this was not just about costs or efficiency. The ability of the British to rule the country and to leave any imprint on it were in doubt. The reconstruction commissioner emphasized that some of the most impressive building projects – the YMCA, the Archaeological Museum, the Hebrew University, and the two state agricultural schools – had been funded by private benefactors and the Zionist movement, and not by the government.\(^{74}\) The high commissioner complained, “I find it hard to escape the conviction that our continued practice of living in hotel bedroom accommodation . . . is neither impressive nor business-like; furthermore there are some in Palestine who undoubtedly regard us as hotel guests – ready to pack our trunks and depart.”\(^{75}\)

The CGO was one of the three top priorities for the post-war reconstruction. The director of public works cautioned against this approach. He pointed out that it would be better to focus on smaller and more realistic projects – for which plans
already existed. This was to no avail. The high commissioner and reconstruction commissioner were intent to go ahead. The central offices plan was once more “out of the box.” Harrison, now a Cyprus-based private architect, was approached again to design it.

By this point, the legislative assembly chamber had become an integral element of the project. The assembly, together with the secretariat and the general attorney office, were in the core building, and marked for the first phase of construction. This time there were no deliberations on whether an assembly hall should or should not be included in the project; it seems that it was a given, despite the political deadlock. This is surprising given the widespread assumption that the White Paper’s constitutional vision was “a dead letter” by this point. It appeared that if the building was to be built at all – it had to include a legislative assembly. In other words, any horizon for continuing British presence in Palestine depended on a semblance of local, binational representation in decision making. An imminent British departure from Palestine was far from inevitable; but the Palestine government could no longer continue without local participation in the shape of the assembly.

In November 1945, Harrison estimated a budget of just above one million Palestinian pounds to accommodate virtually all departments, including the legislative assembly. As the project started to take shape, Harrison’s instructions became clearer, and more and more details were provided. The building would include a covered garage for officials, with air and water facilities but without petrol. The visiting public would station their vehicles in a public car park, which would have a military guard at its entrance and possibly a police control with facilities to sleep, eat, and cook at the site. A cafeteria for light meals was envisioned to accommodate sixty members of staff at once. The space was not to be segregated by rank, sex, race, or religion; Kosher meals would be provided, but there was no mention of halal meals. Other elements were specified in detail, such as telephone, lifts, and lavatories. However, the task of imagining the legislative assembly was handed over to the architect, with no new instructions or details, as indicated in meeting notes: “[I]t was impossible to give any accurate forecast of what would be required in the way of a legislative council chamber and ancillary offices but it was decided that it should be left to the architect’s discretion who would plan on generous scale.” On the one hand the Council was essential to the building, on the other its shape and makeup were entirely unclear.

Harrison inherited a figure of 3,500 square meters for the assembly from Winter’s design, exactly 10 percent of the total built space, but he offered to expand its share to 6,200 square meters. Unlike Winter, who designed the assembly as a separate element to give it a semblance of independence, Harrison integrated it back into the main building, alongside the secretariat and the attorney general. In the 1947 design, captured in the drawings in the Architects’ Journal, the assembly chamber was a two-story hemicycle, adjacent to the offices of the high commissioner and the chief secretary. The semicircular hall was surrounded by a lobby, library, restaurant, and a few retiring rooms for members, interpreters, and clerks. A monumental staircase led to a gallery.
Figure 8. Harrison’s 1947 model, *Architects’ Journal* 107, no. 2779 (13 May 1948). Four different perspectives: a) Overhead; b) Southwest; c) Northwest; and d) East.
Colonial officials remained committed to the project as late as 1947. Design and internal negotiations continued into the autumn of that year, even after the UN Special Committee on Palestine published its recommendations to partition the country into two states. Only on 6 November 1947, less than four weeks before the UN voted on that partition plan, the chief secretary informed Harrison that “in view of present circumstances government had decided not to proceed with the C.G.O scheme.” The project was deferred, as opposed to abandoned, by a beneficial common agreement. Harrison hoped he could continue the project with whichever power came after the Mandate administration, and the British government avoided paying Harrison’s fees for the unfinished segments of the project.
In 1948 Israeli forces occupied Talbiyya, and Karm al-Ruhban fell under Israeli rule, in what was to become West Jerusalem. A proposal to build the Hebrew University campus there was opposed by David Ben Gurion. Eventually, the large plot served for the construction of several monumental public buildings in the 1960s and 1970s: the Israeli President’s Residence, the Jerusalem (Sherover) theatre, the Van Leer Institute, and the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Colonial Aesthetics and Meaning

Beyond the straightforward failure to build the CGO, the project also suffered from significant planning and design shortcomings. This flagship project appeared disconnected from the British’s wider urban plan for Jerusalem. Despite the involvement of the Mandate’s top officials and architects, the different architectural schemes appeared underwhelming—especially when compared with other monumental buildings constructed in Jerusalem by the British, Arabs, and Zionists. The design of the assembly hall, in particular, failed to articulate a meaningful vision for the country. From the early modern period, houses of parliament were typically characterized by monumental architecture laden with symbolism. Some parliaments used classical style, in reference to the “origin” of democracy in ancient Greece; others attempted to define local national identity. The failure to find appropriate architectural symbolism in Palestine was no accident. It reflected the contradictions of the Mandate itself, and the British preference to present themselves as disinterested custodians of Palestine rather than its colonial rulers.

The British invested considerable effort into town planning in Jerusalem, starting from 1918 and particularly in regard to the Old City. British policies on zoning, street naming, and building regulations, such as the stone facade requirement, played a key role in shaping modern Jerusalem. It is therefore striking that in decades of deliberations, there was hardly any reflection on the place that the CGO would occupy in the city, and how this major development would relate to other parts, transportation routes, and the city center. The locally elected municipal council was never included in these discussions: this was symptomatic of what Falestin Naïli termed the “demunicipalization of Jerusalem’s urban governance” under British rule. But British city planners were also hardly involved in this central government project. Jerusalem city planner Kendall was hostile to the project and refused to facilitate zoning changes that would have allowed greater freedom for architects. The CGO project is not mentioned in Kendall’s slick volume on British urban planning in Jerusalem.

British public construction was heavily constrained by the requirement to cover expenditure from Palestine’s own budget and by the limited access to loans. As Jacob Norris has shown, British investment concentrated in key priorities of colonial development, such as the Haifa port and the railways. Nevertheless, the British left several key buildings in Jerusalem, including Government House (the high commissioner’s residence), the general post office, the Palestine Archaeological Museum, the government printshop, the municipality building, and the Arab College.
Most of these were designed by Harrison, as chief architect to the Palestine government between 1921 and 1937. Harrison disliked the use of architecture for what he viewed as crude propaganda: he refused to become city architect of Jerusalem to serve Governor Ronald Storrs’s self-aggrandizing civic agenda. He was also scathing about Zionist plans for Hebrew University on Mount Scopus. But Harrison’s own work could also be seen as a form of propaganda, as it promoted a colonial narrative about British rule in Palestine. In the words of Fuchs and Herbert, Harrison’s architecture presented a sophisticated example of “regional colonialism” – using elements from the local vernaculars to articulate a paternalistic and preservationist conception of colonial rule.

British officials in Palestine preferred to portray themselves not as colonizers but as custodians, who were entrusted with bringing measured development and modernization to the country, while protecting its sacred and ancient character. This rhetoric downplayed the radically disruptive nature of British commitment to the Jewish national home. In his role as the government’s senior architect, Harrison was responsible to giving this message an aesthetic shape. Harrison designed the Palestine Pavilion for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in Wembley in the form of a whitewashed Mamluk-styled mausoleum. Behind this Orientalist facade was a display of mostly Jewish arts and crafts, industry, and agricultural products. The pavilion’s building paid respect to Palestine’s Islamic history, but its content promoted a project of Jewish colonization that threatened to undo that very character. Harrison also designed the coins for the Palestine pound, which were issued in 1927. Working with two scribes, for Arabic and Hebrew, he produced an “austere” design featuring olive tree branches, invoking Palestine’s traditional, rural, and biblical nature.

Harrison perfected this colonial aesthetic in two landmark buildings in Jerusalem: The high commissioner’s residence (Government House) on Jabal Mukabbir (completed in 1933), and the Palestine Archaeological Museum, north of the Old City (1935). These two buildings went far beyond simplistic Orientalism. Harrison borrowed elements from Byzantine, Crusader, and Ottoman architecture – arches, domes, inner courtyards, towers – and distilled them into abstract motifs. The result was a modern style of elemental geometric forms, which resonated with the stark simplicity of Palestinian architectural vernacular. Vaguely Oriental but not historicist, it claimed a level of hybridity between the colonizer and the colonized, ancient and modern, East...
and West. The high commissioner’s residence on the outskirts of Jerusalem overlooking the Old City (a location chosen by Harrison), was a palace of an aloof custodian, rather than an engaged ruler. It presented a romantic and self-deluding vision of British colonial rule, which could be seen to correspond to the vague British obligation to protect the rights of “existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine,” as defined in the terms of the Mandate. At the same time, the colonial commitment to Zionism received no architectural reference.

![The high commissioner’s residence (Government House), Jerusalem, 1932; Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, online at (loc.gov) by/3WKSQ4q (accessed 31 October 2022).](image)

It is striking that Harrison refrained from using this rich aesthetic language in his designs for the central government offices and the legislative assembly. His 1930s schemes for the building were characterized by heavy monumentality, reminiscent of Art Deco style, but with few decorative dimensions. They were almost completely devoid of any historical references or Islamic architectural motifs. It was as if Harrison decided that his lofty architectural vision of a modern Orient was inappropriate or irrelevant here. Wauchope’s only aesthetic instruction was that the building should be stone clad, as appropriate to Jerusalem. In the 1930s, the Mandatory officials did not acknowledge the high symbolic stakes of the project. Perhaps this was because it was much more inward looking, unlike the high commissioner’s residence and the Archaeological Museum, which represented British rule in Palestine to the outer world. The central government offices were to be a site of actual governance, not only by
British officials but also by the local population’s representatives, at the center of the city, accessible to the Palestinian public. Here was an opportunity for the government to communicate to Palestine’s population its vision about the country’s future – but it appeared unable to do so. This may have been because by the mid-1930s, as tensions were rising, it was no longer impossible to conceal the contradiction at the heart of the Mandate, between the vague obligation to local self-rule, and the much more clearly defined commitment to Jewish immigration and colonization.

This very contradiction was the motivation for establishing the legislative assembly, as a forum which could negotiate and contain, if not reconcile, this conflict. Could its architecture embody such a path? The underwhelming architectural design of the assembly hall offered no compelling vision in this regard. As already mentioned, in Harrison’s first plan the assembly was an optional addendum. As the legislature became a realistic proposition in the mid-1930s, Harrison’s “Round project” (1934–38) placed the assembly at the core of the government offices, a sort of legislative nexus between the two executive wings, while the rest of the building was arranged in a semicircle around them. The roundness perhaps alluded to the deliberative nature of the building and could be seen to imply that the government’s authority and legitimacy depended on the assembly. At the same time, as Fuchs suggests, the assembly hall appeared trapped within the fortress of British colonial bureaucracy.101 In Harrison’s final 1947 design, the assembly hall was concealed inside the large government complex, invisible and inaccessible from the outside. This minimized presence may have reflected Harrison’s condescending views on democracy. As he wrote in a letter in 1948: “I don’t believe in democracy . . . . All that can be said of democracy is that bouts of it are necessary. The use of democracy, it seems to me, is to remove what is moribund and prepare the ground for a new oligarchy.”102

Arab and Jewish political elites in Palestine had their own visions for the country, which they articulated in bold architectural language. The Muslim Supreme Council, led by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, built the “Palace Hotel” in 1929 in close vicinity to the CGO site on Julian’s Way. Designed by leading Turkish architect Mehmet Nihat Nigisberk, it was built at a cost of seventy-three thousand Palestine pounds in Ottoman Revivalist style, and was a proud statement of Arab and Islamic continuity.103

hotel was built to accommodate the 1930 World Islamic Congress in Jerusalem, and was considered as a key element in an unfulfilled plan for an Islamic university in the Mamilla (Ma’man Allah) area. It soon became a hub of Palestinian nationalism, serving not only Supreme Muslim Council gatherings, but also the larger Arab public. The Arab Fair, which was held there in 1933 and 1934, celebrated the entrepreneurship of Arab capital and businesses, as part of an Arab Middle East – in fitting with the building’s own style. As Semih Gökatalay shows in his article on the Arab Fair in this *JQ* issue, the colonial government provided almost no support to the fair, which severely undermined its success. Financial difficulties ultimately led to the Palace Hotel being taken over by the Mandatory government, and it was used for temporary accommodation of departments that were slated to move to the central government offices. In 1936, it was used by the Palestine Royal Commission. Poignantly, the flagship building of the Palestinian national movement was the site in which partition was first seriously discussed by British officials.

[Figure 13. Palace Hotel, Jerusalem, [1929–33]; Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, online at (loc.gov) bit.ly/3E6JFE9 (accessed 31 October 2022).]
Not far away, on King George Street, was the Zionist Executive building (“the National Institutions”), a three-story complex, built between 1928 and 1936. As Inbal Bar Asher Gitler argued, the Zionist Executive building, with its straight, simple, and “functional” lines, signaled the Zionist embrace of modernism, and the turn away from the Orientalist style of early Zionist architecture. The Russian-born, German-educated architect, Yochanan Yevgeny Ratner, was consciously searching for a “national style for Zionism and the emerging Jewish nation” that would negate Jewish diasporic identities, and break with local Palestinian architecture. Ratner wrote explicitly against the use of Muslim architectural motifs. The executive’s fort-like building was devoid of ornamentation but may have alluded to Jerusalem’s Ottoman city walls with its slitwindows, and a slope reminiscent of the Jerusalem Citadel.\(^{107}\) Ratner was later involved in designing the so-called Tower and Stockade model for Zionist settlements, and eventually became a Haganah (and later Israeli) general.

The executive building housed the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund, as well as the Yishuv’s representative institutions, Va’ad Leumi (Jewish National Council) and Asefat ha Nivharim (Assembly of Representatives), which convened there regularly. It also served as a Haganah headquarters and housed two large weapons caches.\(^{108}\) Despite the low budget (thirty-five thousand pounds) and criticism by key Zionist architects of being too modest, the Zionist Executive building became an important symbolic and political center, as power within the Zionist movement shifted from Europe to Palestine.\(^{109}\) The large open courtyard between the buildings...
became a space for Zionist celebrations and demonstrations. In March 1948, a car bomb delivered by ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni’s nationalist fighters destroyed parts of the building and killed thirteen people.

It was not lost on the British officials that the Jewish Agency was able to build its own semigovernmental headquarters in Jerusalem, while the Palestine government resided in rented accommodation. High Commissioner Gort found it an unacceptable situation. As he wrote to the Colonial Office in 1944:

>In an eastern country where face is predominantly important it is sad to contrast the accommodation of the Jewish Agency and the Mandatory Power. The former is housed in up to date and spacious building whereas in this year of grace the British Civil Secretariat and the Military Headquarters have still to make do in hired bedroom accommodation on the upper floor of the leading hotel and in close on 90 other hirings mostly quite unsuitable.\textsuperscript{110}

The high commissioner wanted a respectable government building to act as the “face” of Mandatory Palestine. But what was that face? Harrison’s final 1947 scheme was more impressive and reflected the growing concern to imperial prestige and to the symbolic dimensions of the project. It was a fortress-like complex towering over the city, invoking the metaphor of Jerusalem as a city built on a hill. The \textit{Architects’ Journal} noted that the building featured vaults “in traditional Palestinian style”; these vaults also appeared in the monumental arched entrances.\textsuperscript{111} One could find, perhaps, in the square inner courtyard references to early modern European imagined reconstructions of Solomon’s Temple, or allusions to Andalusian Almohad minarets in the square-shaped tower.\textsuperscript{112} Overall, however, it is difficult to discern a clear symbolic and political statement about Palestine.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure15.png}
\caption{Harrison’s 1947 plans, longitudinal and transverse sections, \textit{Architects’ Journal} 107, no. 2779 (13 May 1948).}
\end{figure}
Conclusions

The central government offices project left voluminous files in the colonial archive, but no trace on Jerusalem’s urban landscape and almost no discussion in the literature. This lack of interest is striking. With partition and the Nakba so often assumed to be inevitable outcomes of the Mandate, there may be a tendency to view unrealized British initiatives as of little significance, and to assume that a unitary Palestine was never a real possibility. This inability to think of Mandatory Palestine as a state-in-the-making no doubt has to do with the British failure to establish state institutions such as the legislative assembly – a failure we explored in this article in a very material sense. However, this was not a failure of simple inaction: it was a spectacular effort, involving hundreds if not thousands of imperial bureaucrats over twenty-five years. All in all, at least four different projects were commissioned, three plots of land were purchased, and hundreds of thousands of pounds were incurred in direct costs. This project was an active conversation from the onset of the Mandate until its very last breath.

The deliberations over the legislative assembly chamber can be seen as a seismograph of British plans for Palestine’s political and constitutional future. The changing place of the legislative council in the CGO project reflected the internal debate about the nature of British presence in Palestine and the tangibility of this political institution at every stage. Paradoxically, despite the continuous failure to establish a legislative assembly, it became increasingly central to CGO planning. Herbert Samuel’s aborted 1922 plan for a weak legislative council, dominated by British and Zionist members, did not envisage the construction of a dedicated assembly building. It was unrelated to the central government offices project, which was launched at the same time and aimed to cut rental costs and increase efficiency. The primary aim of the CGO was to house the secretariat and key government departments, and this remained true until the very end of the Mandate. Security considerations became another motivation in the late 1930s and 1940s. The assembly hall, which was first introduced as an optional element, became a central feature, and ultimately a vital component. A “Council Chamber” first appeared as a tentative element in 1930, shortly after the Passfield White Paper. In the mid-1930s, when the Palestine government was moving to establish an assembly with muted Arab support, the assembly hall became a key design consideration, and was placed at the literal heart of the plan. In 1936, Zionist opposition derailed this political initiative, leading to the Arab Revolt and the 1937 Royal Commission partition plan. As a result, the entire CGO project came undone. However, with the 1939 White Paper, and its blueprint for a binational state in Palestine, the assembly was once again integrated into the design. Tenders were prepared, and only the outbreak of World War II stopped it from being built. In 1942 the project returned in larger form, and in a more prominent site, and considerations of imperial prestige and legacy became central. By that point, it was clear that if the CGO project was to be built at all – it had to include a legislative assembly. Overall, in much of the 1930s and 1940s, and as late as 1947, the Palestine government was heavily invested in this project.
All throughout, the discussion over the assembly hall was kept confidential and involved a small group of colonial officials and architects, who did not consult the population of Palestine and its representatives. Both in constitutional and architectural terms, the legislative assembly was a colonial design, whose primary aim was to contain Arab opposition to the Mandate. This was reflected in the enclosure of the assembly hall within the colonial government complex. This subordinate position within the building or next to it demonstrated that the assembly was a far cry from Arab demands for a representative parliament with real powers. And yet in 1935–36 the Arab leadership was willing to accept the scheme on the assumption that, once created, the assembly could transcend and challenge its constraints.

The legislative assembly and the central government offices were never built. At the same time, the Arab national movement and the Zionist movement built monumental buildings that spelled out their contrasting visions for the future of Palestine: the Arab-Islamic continuity of the Palace Hotel, on the one hand, and the Zionist Executive building’s modernist break with the country’s Arab past, on the other. In contrast to both, the design of the legislative assembly, and of the CGO more generally, offered no clear statement about the future of Palestine. The British did not want the building to express their commitment to Zionism, but also largely refrained from references to Palestinian historical architecture, which they had used elsewhere. This lack of decisiveness, vision, or capacity to overcome the political impasse that they themselves had created rendered the Palestine government an eternally provisional structure that rented its accommodations across the city. In 1948, British administrators departed from Jerusalem after they had been living in a hotel for a decade. Instead of “the noblest group of buildings in the Near East,” housing Palestine’s government and legislature, they left in Karm al-Ruhban a large empty plot overlooking the Old City, on which the Israeli president’s residence now stands.

Yair Wallach is a reader in Israeli studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, specializing in the social and cultural history of modern Palestine/Israel.

Julio Moreno Cirujano is a PhD candidate at SOAS, writing his dissertation on colonial material culture during the British Mandate in Palestine.

The authors would like to thank the JQ reviewers, as well as Eli Osheroff, Dotan Halevy, and Franziska Wilcken for their comments on a draft of this article, and Professor Laila Parson, for her feedback during the presentation of this article at the Institute for Palestine Studies 2022 conference “Reassessing the British Mandate in Palestine.”
Endnotes


2 Percy Winter, “A Brief History of the Projected New Government Offices Jerusalem as from the Year 1922,” 17 December 1944, 11/3/19, vol. 5, “Roads – New Central Government Offices Jerusalem,” Israeli State Archives (ISA) MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zv, 539–52. In this article we included the original Mandatory reference numbers and, on first mention, also the file titles – as well as the digital reference provided recently by the Israeli State Archives, during the digitization process.

3 In the 1922 discussions, the term legislative council is used, while in the 1940s, “legislative assembly” becomes more prevalent, although “council” and “assembly” are used interchangeably. In Arabic both terms were translated as majlis, and similarly in Hebrew as mo’atsa.


7 Laila Parsons is currently researching the Palestinian campaign for an elected parliament and democratic government, and presented her findings in the Institute for Palestine Studies’ conference “Reassessing the British Mandate in Palestine”: Laila Parsons, “The Palestinian Struggle for a Parliament, 1920–1935,” Institute for Palestine Studies, 1 November 2022.

8 The main sources for this article are from the archive of the Mandatory Public Works Department, held in the digitized Israeli State Archives. However, most of the drawings and images, which Fuchs studied in detail and reproduced in his thesis, have not yet been scanned and were unavailable to us.

9 The Serai was relocated to the Khassaki Sultan compound. The compound was originally the Mamluk palace of Sitt Tunshuq, which was transformed into an Ottoman charitable institution and a soup kitchen in the sixteenth century by the wife of the sultan Sulyayman al-Qanuni. See the inauguration inscription in Mehmet Tütüncü, *Turkish Jerusalem (1516–1917): Ottoman Inscriptions from Jerusalem and Other Palestinian Cities* (Haarlem: SOTA, 2006), 127–31.

JERUSALEM QUARTERLY 92  [ 97 ]


An early mention of this plan appears in Havatselet, 16 August 1901, 241. The Nikoforiya plan for a new Serai, with a large square, garden, and a road to the train station appears in Hashkafa, 10 January 1908, 1. Hazvi reports the plans were put on hold due to protest from Old City businesses. Hazvi, 12 June 1910, 3.

Two historical overviews of the project were prepared in the 1940s; see Winter, “A Brief History.” (Note 4 includes a useful list of relevant files and a chronology of the project until 1944.) See “Note Regarding the Construction of Central Government Offices, Jerusalem,” 12 October 1946, 11/3/19 (5), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zv, 3.

Quoted in Winter, “A Brief History,” 2.


For granular analysis of the failed 1922–23 Legislative Council initiative, see Porath, Emergence, 123–83; and Lesch, Arab Politics, 180–87.

“Minutes of the Advisory Council First Meeting,” 6 October 1920, CO814/6, “Government of Palestine – Minutes of the Advisory Council meetings,” ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-HighCommissioner-000x04w.


Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 4 June 1935, 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 308.


A council chamber is first mentioned (without details) in Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 15 December 1930, 11/3/19 (1), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-0005up1, 86–87.

Tom Segev, One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate (London: Little, Brown, 2000), 400.


Handwritten notes by Harrison, 16 August 1931. 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 511.


Fuchs, Austen St. Barbe Harrison, 257.


Harrison to Director Public Works, 4 October 1934, 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 401. The additional plot was purchased in 1935 for £25,000. “Special Warrant,” 14 August 1935. 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 247. The original plot was purchased in 1928 for £21,300. Note to Chief Secretary, 1930, “New Government Offices – Jerusalem (vol. 1)”, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000mu42, 29.

Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 9 November 1934, 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 427.

Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 4 June 1935, “Central Government Offices, Jerusalem, Enclosure C, Points for Decision,” typescript and comments in handwriting. 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 313.

The Hebrew Doar Hayom reported on...
rumors of a new “10 [sic] floor government headquarters,” alongside a report on the intensifying negotiations over the legislative assembly; Doar Hayom did not connect the two things, Doar Hayom, 23 July 1935, 1. For other press mentions of the CGO, see Haaretz, 10 May 1930, 1; Mir’at al-Sharq, 2 March 1932, 4; Haaretz, 21 February 1938, 3; ‘Al Hamishmar, 16 December 1946, 3.

Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 4 June 1935, “Central Government Offices, Jerusalem, Enclosure C, Points for Decision.” 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 313, in handwriting. Fuchs read the same number as “50.”

Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 4 June 1935.

Doar Hayom, 23 July 1935, 1. For other press mentions of the CGO, see Haaretz, 10 May 1930, 1; Mir’at al-Sharq, 2 March 1932, 4; Haaretz, 21 February 1938, 3; ‘Al Hamishmar, 16 December 1946, 3.

Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 4 June 1936. 11/3/19 (2), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kk, 313, in handwriting. Fuchs read the same number as “50.”

Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary, 4 June 1935.


Lesch, Arab Politics, 195–96.

“Note on Interview with H. E. on 3. 4. 1936” (3 April 1936), 1/3/19 (3), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8kl, 181. This was a meeting of the High Commissioner with Chief Secretary, Director of Public Works, and Harrison, to discuss the Central Government Offices.


Winter, “A Brief History.”

Director of Agriculture and Fisheries to Chief Secretary, 19 January 1937, W/228/36 “Proposed Transfer of Government Offices to Ex-Palace Hotel Building or Elsewhere.” ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000nhos, 56–58.

High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 26 November 1938, W/15/38 “Construction of New Government Offices, Jerusalem 1938;” ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000nmnb, 26.

Erich Mendelsohn to Chief Secretary, 10 January 1940, W/15/38, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000nmnb, 185.


The four-person committee consisted of the Chief Secretary, Director of Public Works, and representatives of the Treasury and the Attorney General. Chief Secretary to Attorney General, 4 April 1939, A.G.1/134 “Administration: New Government Offices,” ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandateAttnGen-00063zr, 75.

Winter to Director of Public Works, 31 March 1939, 11/3/19 (4), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zu, 302.

Winter to Director of Public Works, 1 June 1939, 11/3/19 (4), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zu, 258–64.

High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 30 June 1939. 11/3/19 (4), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zu, 230–33.

Winter to Director of Public Works, 1 June 1939, 11/3/19 (4), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zu, 258–64.


Handwritten note, 9 February 1939, W/15/38 ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000nmnb, 20.


Winter, “A Brief History.”

“List of Tenderers for CGO, Jerusalem: Excavation and Earthwork,” (October 1939), 11/3/19 (4), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zu, 200. The list includes the names of 10 contractors. See also Winter, “A Brief History.”

After the declaration of war, the Palestine government considered building a downscaled version of the CGO, but this idea was abandoned. Planning work, however, continued slowly until 1943.

Keith Roach to Attorney General, 16 November 1942, W/115/47, “Site of

64 Meeting to discuss sites for CGO, 15 June 1943, W/115/47, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 39–40.

65 High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 16 November 1944, W/115/47, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 48.


67 Chief Secretary to Director of Public Works, Director of Medical Services. 31 August 1946, 11/3/19 (5), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zv, 164.

68 A favored location on Julian’s Way south of the King David hotel, with better views over the Old City, proved too expensive. The committee also considered locations outside Jerusalem, in Qalandiya, Biddu, and Qaryat al-‘Inab, but decided they were unpractical. Report on a meeting to discuss sites for CGO, 15 June 1943, W/115/47, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 39–40.

69 Note of a meeting between Chief Secretary, Financial Secretary, and Reconstruction Commissioner, 8 June 1943. The “Qatamun Site” referred to two plots of fifty-two dunums for the government offices (£210,000) and a nearby plot of 220 dunums for government officers’ housing (£249,000). However, by October 1944, speculators had already purchased the larger plot and the high commissioner pressed the colonial secretary to approve the purchase of the remaining plot. High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 24 October 1944, W/115/47, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 44. The government eventually acquired a sixty-six dunum site from the Orthodox Patriarchate for £210,000 in September 1945. CS, Record of a Meeting 17 September 1945, W/115/47, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 68. See the payment warrant in 11/3/19 (5), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zv, 180–82.

70 Unsigned memorandum to Director of Public Works, 10 April 1945, W/115/47, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 54.


72 G. W. Heron, “Report of the Reconstruction Commissioner” (Palestine: [s.n.], 1945), 16.


74 Heron, “Report of the Reconstruction Commissioner,” 8.

75 High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 23 December 1944, W/115/47, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 52.

76 Kenniff, acting Director of Public Works to Reconstruction Commissioner. “Architectural Programme,” 23 December 1944, 11/3/19 (5), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zv, 534–36. The second priority was a large government complex in Julian’s Way (on the previous CGO site) to accommodate the Law Courts, Jerusalem District Administration, District Police headquarters and possibly Palestine Broadcasting Service. The third priority was a prison for the south of Palestine.

77 Khalidi, Iron Cage, 122.

78 Harrison, handwritten note, 17 November 1945, 11/3/19 (5), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000t8zv, 298.

79 Note of a meeting, Harrison and Director of Public Works, 14 December 1945, 11/3/19 (5), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000t8zv, 271.

80 Note of a meeting, Harrison and Director of Public Works. Harrison was provided specifications from the project’s previous iterations (1935, 1939) although it was clear these would need to be updated.


83 Chief Secretary to Director of Public Works, 15 February 1947, 11/3/19 (5), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000t8zv, 66.

84 “Record of a meeting on 6 November 1947,” 11/3/19 (6), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000t8zv, 43.

85 Chief Secretary to Harrison, 20 November 1947, 11/3/19 (6), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPubWorks-000t8zv, 18.


The body of scholarship on colonial urban planning in Jerusalem, particularly under Governor Storrs and his “Pro-Jerusalem Society” is rich and growing. In addition to works already mentioned here, see the works of Salim Tamari, Roberto Mazza, Daniel B. Monk, Max Sternberg and Wendy Pullan, Noah Hysler-Rubin, Inbal Bar-Asher Gilter, and Rana Barakat. However, the CGO was a central government project, in which local planners had effectively no say, so the project does not feature in this scholarship.


Hoffman, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*, 148.

Fuchs and Herbert, “A Colonial Portrait of Jerusalem.”


Hoffman, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*, 140.

Fuchs and Herbert, “Representing Mandatory Palestine”; Hoffman, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*, 152–94.


Harrison to Markus Reiner, 16 November 1948, quoted in Fuchs, 78.

Initial sketches were prepared by the renowned architect Mimar Kemalettin in 1925. The full design was conducted by his assistant Nihat Nigisberk. Inbal Ben-Asher Gitler, *Architectural Culture in British-Mandate Jerusalem, 1917–1948* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).


High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 16 November 1944, W/115/47 Site, ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-SecretaryPolice-000ndgv, 48. Annual rental expenditure was £52,000 – “an expensive privilege.”


Spanish Jesuit architect Juan Bautista Villalpando (1552–1608) was the first to visualize the biblical Temple’s floor plan as a square inner yard. See Sergey R. Kravtsov, “Juan Bautista Villalpando and Sacred Architecture in the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64, no. 3 (2005): 312–39.

Direct costs, as mentioned above, involved the purchase of the Julian’s Way site in 1928 for £21,300, and an additional plot in 1935 for £25,000. The Karm al-Ruhban site cost PP 210,000, and Harrison’s fee in 1948 amounted to £11,503. “Director of Public Works to Chief Secretary,” 10 March 1948, 11/3/19 (6), ISA-MandatoryOrganizations-MandatePublicWorks-000t8zw, 6.