

Religious voices, Gray Spacing and, Urban Informality

The Lababidi Mosque in Acre and its Reconstruction

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In March 2012 following a lengthy urban conflict religious activities and prayers were restored at the Lababidi mosque at the mixed city of Acre in the North of Israel for the first time since the dramatic geopolitical changes that followed the emergence of the state of Israel in 1948. In our project Enchanted places on the margins in contemporary Israel we look in comparative perspectives on such newly emerging sacred places among Jewish, Islamic and Christian communities. Drawing on recent exploration on the changing nature of contemporary urban planning we examine this urban development within the context of growing urban informality and gray spaces in the city. It would seem that Modern urban planning, characterized by a rational, modernistic, centralistic and superimposed approach to urban design, is becoming increasingly vulnerable to informality and gray spaces, and these changes are now being noticed and described by scholars (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004; Roy, 2005, 2009; Yiftachel, 2009a). Religion has been identified as one compelling narrative that serves to mobilize such groups within cities (AlSayyad and Massoumi, 2010; Beaumont and Barker, 2011; Tong and Kong, 2000; Garbin, 2012). In this paper we ask: How does religion serve as a driver of urban transformation? We explore how religious practices, discourse and buildings Religion is becoming more and more instrumental for minority or marginalized groups to claim the city. Against the might of contemporary neo-liberal logic of city planning influenced mostly by maximizing growth, cost efficiency and accumulation (Harvey, 2002) marginalized/dispossessed communities must find different narratives to 'claim their city'. One such compelling narrative and indeed growing force in mobilizing groups within cities is indeed, religion (Yiftachel and Roded, 2010).

### **Urban informality and Gray spacing: Introducing the religious factor**

Let us explore albeit very briefly the main theoretical concepts and contextualization of the mosque reconstruction. Urban informality was suggested to indicate an organizing logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself (Roy & AlSayyad,

2004). Against the standard dichotomy of the allegedly separated sectors within the city, formal and informal, Roy and AlSayyad propose that informality is not a separate sector but rather a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another. Therefore, urban informality is a paradigm that refers to the organizing logic and system of norms that govern urban transformations (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004). Informality denotes a state of exception from the formal order of urbanization and Roy urges planners to use and even embrace this state of exception to mitigate some of the vulnerabilities of the urban poor (2005). Albeit, this contextualization does not address fully nor acknowledges the growing influence of new types of colonial relations which are becoming more and more common in contemporary urban regimes thus facilitating a process of ‘creeping apartheid’ (Yiftachel, 2009). Consequently, the urban is gradually succumbing to an Agambenian ‘state of exception’ that creates a particular logic of governmentality which allows for a double-layered constitutional system (Agamben, 2005, 2006). The legal production of the state of exception enables the construction or emergence of a space between fundamental rights and the rule of law, wherein states can remain lawful while transgressing individual rights. Further, the state’s ‘power of inclusive exclusion’ (Ophir, Givoni, Sari, 2009) exposes particular populations to premeditated marginalization and other forms of violence in a multi scalar setting from the personal through the urban to the national. At the same time these spaces where such forms of governmentality exist may also serve as the place of the ungovernable where power can shipwreck and be challenged.

“Gray space” means the position of various urban phenomena in the vaguely defined gap between the official and legal and the destroyed, evicted and illegal. Yiftachel suggests that there is a rising tide of observable gray spaces in various urban settings worldwide (Yiftachel, 2009a). As a concept, gray space relates to urban relations, people, and structures that are positioned outside the hegemonic grip and control of the official planning authorities, yet are tolerated or at least exist in perpetual and continuous dialogue with them. These spaces are “neither integrated nor eliminated,” neither accepted nor actively prohibited by authorities (Yiftachel, 2009b). Following Yiftachel and trailing Orsi’s (1985; 1999: 45) “Urban religion”, we hold it to be: “a site of converging and conflicting visions and voices, practices and orientations which arise out of the complex desires, needs and fears of many different people”. As such we argue that religious spaces, buildings, and discourse are emerging collectively as important phenomena in the growing informality of the city, and that religion predominates in driving socio-political change that in turn engenders the reorganization of urban spaces.

By focusing on the reconstruction of the Lababidi mosque we aim to demonstrate the city's transformation in terms of its planning processes, everyday life, and politics. We address three questions. How are minority religious claims formulated and given voice through religious spatialities? How are these claims being challenged by hegemonic opposing groups in the city? And in what ways do these voices and actions transform the city's character? These questions constitute our point of departure to engage with the growing role of religion in contemporary urban planning and transformations.

### **The Lababidi Mosque in Acre between Modern City Planning and the Growing Informality in the Ethnocratic City.**

Acre has a long and convoluted urban history and hence experienced some radical changes in its plan over time. The first modern plan was drawn in 1909 (Waterman, 1971). It left the historic walled old town intact and proposed an orthogonal road system separated by 40 x 50 meter rectangular blocks for the extramural modern town. During the British Mandate (1917-1948), a suburb quickly developed north of the historic walls. It consisted primarily of luxurious townhouses owned by affluent families (Dichter, 1973). In 1930, Ahmad Lababidi, the son of a local wealthy Muslim family, constructed a new mosque as part of a private/family religious endowment (*waqf dhuri*) in the new emerging suburb. This suburb is known in contemporary Acre as the Mandatory City. Lababidi mosque was the first mosque to be constructed outside the walls of the historic city. The mosque was meant to accommodate the needs of Acre's small population of wealthy Muslims who lived outside the walls (interview with N, April 18, 2012). A modestly proportioned (20 x 8 meters) rectangular building was built with fine-cut local stones on an empty lot owned by the Lababidi endowment. One intriguing feature of the mosque is the absence of a minaret. Our interlocutors suggest that the builder "omitted" the minaret in an effort to maintain a low profile, given the high socioeconomic status and bourgeoisie characteristics of the new

The establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948 had a dramatic effect on the development of the city, on its former Arab urban community, and hence on the Mosque. Israel as the national manifestation of Zionism brought a new understanding and dimensions to urban planning. Acre succumbed to new types of political geography and urban governance. As other former Arab towns it has changed due to influx of new Jewish

immigrants and repopulation plans by the state. Acre, as other towns of sharing the same urban history, became to be known as a ‘mixed city and developing along ethnocentric planning logic. Acre is currently a city of circa 50000 people constitutes 70% Jewish people and the rest Arabs. During this period (1948-1990s) the Lababidi mosque shared the same fate as other Muslim religious institutions in the modern parts of Acre; it was closed and banned from use by its former congregation (interview with M, February 27, 2013). Legally and officially, the mosque was part of the private Islamic endowment (*waqf dhuri*) of the Lababidi family, but its ownership rights could not be exercised or even restored (Interview with N, April 18, 2012). Thus, the mosque was left alone in a state of legal limbo; banned to its former community and unavailable to the local economic forces that could restore it to active use. As time passed, its physical condition deteriorated and thus, the mosque stood derelict within the changing, fast modernizing city.

### **Voicing marginality and the informality of the city**

In the summer of 2005, the Department for Religious Sects<sup>1</sup> in the Israeli Ministry of Interior initiated an emergency restoration of the dilapidating mosque. The local internet forum was abuzz and comments were made expressing grave concern by Jewish residents. But shortly after the quick renovation the mosque subsided again to its limbo situation and an existing but not operating urban institution

In 2009, a new director and board members were appointed to the Al-Jazzar Charitable Trust. In Acre, and in the current context of the struggle over the mosque, this change is personified in the newly nominated director of the Trust, Salim Najami.

He is self-proclaimed secular, and does not practice Islam in his daily routine: “I am not a religious man... I came from a place of not knowing what a mosque is, or how many times one has to pray during the day...” After two years in office Najami set out to restore the Lababidi mosque as an active praying house. “There was a need for a place where Muslims could pray in the new city, indeed there was a need. It is not that I wanted to provoke someone. The mosque was already there in 1948 and I do understand the circumstances [the ample repercussions of the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state], but what I do not understand is the situation in which the majority of the Muslim community lives outside the Old City, but we are not allowed to build anything. We are third of the city’s population. Two thirds of the community lives outside the walls. Yet they do not

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. non-Jewish religious groups in Israel.

have as much as one mosque. Why must an old man who lives in the new city walk and pray in the Old City? I acted with no backup from any religious authorities and I did not ask for one. I wanted to act quietly and without any publicity or provocation” (Salim Najami, interview, December 26, 2012).

Quiet as he might wanted the restoration to pass it challenged the Jewish public sphere and responses were soon to follow on a personal as well more official levels. The oft repeated slogan regarding claims like this by the Muslim minority is that they disrupt the “fragile status quo”; a discourse used as a rationale for continuing exclusion of minorities from the urban sphere (Yiftachel, 2009a). Najami remained undeterred and followed through with the restoration against heavy pressures both covert and in the open.

Najami’s conduct fits with Holston’s understanding of the urban insurgent as a political opponent that destabilizes the dominant regime of citizenship (2009). Religious experiences, religious sites, and buildings are all used by the different agents of the city as platforms to defamiliarize the current and prevailing urban logic and planning. The contingency of the project and the role played by Najami clearly illustrate the difficulties of theorizing about or factoring informality into contemporary urban planning. Gray spacing is the challenge that usually remains unmapped, uncharted and unregulated. However, these excerpts and pivotal moments of this urban struggle provide a rich opportunity to explore more closely how it is unfolding and then transforming the city.

In the case at hand, the municipality had no real influence on events because it has no jurisdiction over the mosque. Consequently, the mayor and other city authorities played insignificant roles in the public conflict that was sparked by the project. While the public debate raged, public figures from each of the two communities voiced their opinions in the local press about either the importance or the futility of the renovation respectively (Mynet, 22.12.2011). It would seem that Najami became a lightning rod for negativity and blaming; he persevered in advancing the project as discreetly as possible under the circumstances while all were losing their heads and blaming everything on him. The mosque was renovated along its original simple lines from the 1930s (interview with M, January 27, 2013). The renovation was kept simple and functional. It progressed until completion despite objections and hurdles within and without the local Muslim community.

On March 11, 2012, the mosque was inaugurated and a prayer service conducted—the first since 1948. To avoid further public debate or protests, only two hundred local Muslim dignitaries were discreetly invited to this festive occasion. Since then, five prayers have been said in the mosque every day, seven days a week. However, the mosque has a

few cautious self-imposed restrictions. In addition, the mosque is kept closed and locked at all times except during prayers, and the more political prayer of Friday noon is not conducted, to avoid provoking reactions from the city's Jewish majority. (Interview with M, January 27, 2013). The Jewish (and some Islamic) voices that had expressed concern over the possible ramifications of the opening of the mosque have subsided. Neither state nor city authorities have responded to the challenge of the mosque's re-opening.

In this reality, we observe the success of the mosque's role in enabling the infiltration of a religious minority into Acre's landscape and daily existence, providing a prime example of gray spacing and the political geography of informality in Acre. This, we argue, manifests the successful employment of religion by a marginalized minority to change the city and its spaces.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article started with questions on the changing nature of urban landscapes and everyday life. Our argument works against Weber's rationalization of the modern city and the Simmelian's city of strangers, in which marginalized and minority groups of all sorts are generally muted, and religion becomes a way of establishing intimacy (indeed, familiarization) with one's city. Following Yiftachel's gray spacing and Roy's urban informality, we suggest that nowadays religion is a framework useful to formerly marginalized strangers to empower themselves and find their place within the city. Therefore, our main argument is that people who find themselves deprived, muted, and disposed of are now more frequently turning to religion, religious buildings, and religious voices as mechanisms by which they establish and maintain their presence in the city. We analyzed the case of the Lababidi mosque in Acre to investigate these changes. We demonstrated that urban spaces and landscapes in the city of Acre are becoming more strongly influenced by religious claims and religious buildings, as our case study shows the struggle over religious sites. This struggle does not end with the simple demand for more democratic urban procedures but should also be seen as a mechanism that marginalized urban citizens can use to challenge conventional property rights and hegemonic domination of the urban landscape (Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2003; Yiftachel 2009b; Shoval, 2013).