

Gray Spacing through the Sacred: Charisma and the Consecration of the Urban Landscape in the Israeli Periphery.

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A paper presented at the RGS-IBG (British Geographers annual conference) 2015
September 1-4, University of Exeter, UK

In this lecture I would like to discuss the mounting importance of religion and its growing importance in informal urban planning. I will illustrate my arguments through two case studies taken from the northern periphery of Israel; the Lababidi Mosque in Acre and the Tomb of Rachel in Tiberias. My discussion entails a theoretical discussion of two interrelated terms which have recently gained currency in cultural-political geography and surely urban planning: Gray spacing and urban informality. These terms relate to changes which take place in cities and are not the outcome of formal procedures and rationalistic and modernistic urban planning. Through the discussion of the resurgence of religion in the urban sphere I argue that religion is becoming paramount for both hegemonic and subordinate groups within cities as an apparatus to change and influence informal urban planning. My current discussion is part of a comparative research which I conduct jointly with Prof Nurit Stadler of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In this project, “Enchanted Places on the Margins of Contemporary Israel” we explore sacred sites through a neo-Gramscian perspective that regards those places as sites of struggle over identity and territoriality and following the Weberian arguments on Charisma. As part of this comparative and multi-sited project we look into the case studies that will serve me in this lecture to illustrate my arguments. More specifically, I narrate the struggle over these newly renovated and emerging sites in

the urban sphere as part of my theoretical contextualization of gray space and informality. I intend to demonstrate how processes of religious resurgence from below are becoming more and more meaningful in shaping the urban landscape and in changing modernistic urban planning.

Gray spaces and urban informality

These phenomena are noted to have emerged in recent decades in response to worldwide economic liberalization. As concepts, they help explain the current dynamics of the city, because we can regard the religious claims of minorities as claims to the city and as expressions of citizenship insurgency manifested through identity politics of alterity. 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). Roy argues that urban informality is not a system of norms but rather exists outside the norms, whether they are statutory or through economic regulations. “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 not eliminated,” neither accepted nor actively prohibited by authorities (Yiftachel, 2009b). Marginal individuals and minority groups can operate in these spaces to actively influence the city.

Following these theoretical construction I suggest that religion and religionization are becoming pivotal in the gray spacing of cities. In what follows I will explore two sacred sites which recently been renovated and reformulated outside the purview of formal urban planning procedures and agencies.

The Tomb of Rachel in Tiberias

On January 1, 1996 an Arab Israeli Parliament member demanded response from the Minister of Justice in the following matter: I was informed that the tomb of Sukayna bint al-Hussein was desecrated even though this is a holy Muslim site. The organization of religious Islamic authorities totally rejects any Jewish claim over this grave. And following I would like to ask: 1. Is your office aware to an official document of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of 1950 which affirms the Islamic status of the site? And what will your office do in order to allow Muslims to manage this site? The minister answer was in written format to the protocol: On March 1996 Rabbi Rafael Cohen, an alderman of Tiberias municipality, has invaded the deserted Muslim graveyard and began renovating this tomb claiming that this the tomb of Rachel the wife of Rabbi Akiva, a venerated sage of the later first century AD. Indeed, the examination conducted by the ministry suggests that this is indeed a holy Muslim grave and served as a pilgrimage site. So, what was this invasion and what is it all about? Apparently back in 1974 a small religious ngo was registered in Tiberias. The head of this charity organization was Rafael Cohen a school teacher but also holder of a few religious functions at the

municipality. In 1994 he uncovers the ‘true’ grave which according to his claims served as the base upon which the Muslims later built a sacred site. For the last twenty years this newly invented Jewish site dedicated to Rachel the wife of one of the most venerable Jewish leaders is drawing more attention, pilgrims and indeed gain credence among religious Jewish people. Rafael was tenacious and at times resourceful enough as to thwart various counter claims and official authorities’ moves to end his invasion therein. In order to understand the links I am trying to show the link between religious activities and challenging formal urban procedures. The following is an excerpt from an interview I conducted recently with Rabbi Rafael Cohen. In this passage he narrates how invasion which was followed by illegal renovation of the site were approved ex post facto. The speaker is Rafael but he tells the story by allegedly quoting the city engineer:

I passed by the site, I saw an unauthorized iron construction – I, the city engineer, have to sign everything – every small porch he needs to approve. So he tells me, I pass there and I see this construction and I did not believe my eyes how could they not ask me, I am number one I need to know. I parked my vehicle and went up the ladder and looked at the roof- who ever made this construction is a real expert. He far exceeded the demands by 20% usually asked from any contractor...so he told me I approved it. interview with Rafael Cohen, March 2014)

In the case of Tiberias Cohen’s mythologization process succeeded as he was working informally and challenged urban and state authorities through gray spacing the city. The authorities on their part find themselves in an uncertain position which leads them eventually to willy-nilly accept in retrospect the changes enforced on the urban plan through sacred by a marginal group. This holds true for my next case study which is drawn from Acre.

The Lababidi Mosque – This small mosque was endowed by Ahmad Lababidi a son of a local wealthy family in Acre in 1930. It was the first religious building to be built outside the historic city. A modest rectangular building that was constructed without a minaret as the sound of the call for prayer could easily be heard from within the old city. The changes brought forth by the 1948 war and the foundation of the State of Israel changed among other things the urban landscape and geopolitics. Following the mosque was closed and banned from religious activities. The building stood empty and void of any activities for decades until in 2004 a demolition warrant was issued on the dilapidated building. Following and in response a modest sum was given to the Acre Municipality to carry a quick renovation of the external parts of the mosque. This partial renovation of the mosque stirred the urban sphere. In the local internet forum Akkonet the majority of the writers agreed that this is indeed a disaster that would change the fragile co-existence in the city. It would seem that the most pertinent observation regarding our discussion of gray spacing the city comes from the head of a local Yeshiva Rabbi Nachshon Cohen: this incident clearly indicates the weakness of the state that is seen in every direction. It is also saddening to see that the street signs in the old city were removed and Quran inscriptions were put in their place. (Haaretz, 12/6/2005).

Clearly Cohen sees the renovation as an expression of undermining state's authority. In the years that followed nothing has changed in regard to the deserted mosque until a new committee of Islamic assets in Acre was nominated. The al-Jazzar Charitable trust as it is officially called is currently headed by Salim Najami who was solely responsible for the launch of a renovation project which against all odds not only preserved the dilapidating mosque but also re-inscribed it as an active house of prayer unto the urban landscape. Najami pushed forward the

renovation against forces from the municipal and national levels. He succeeded in opening a mosque which has been closed for 65 years and on March 2012 the first prayer was conducted since 1948 at the mosque. This is how he narrates the process through which he managed to push through and prevail:

When they [unofficial approaches of state authorities] came to convince me to keep the status quo... I have answered that they are more and more Arabs that live outside the walls [of the Old City] ...and I am looking for what is good for the people and not for the political players. There was a genuine need for a praying place in the new city – indeed there was a need! It is not that I wanted to provoke anyone. This mosque was in existence in 1948 and it is not as if I am changing anything. I understand that the new city had a Jewish majority but I fail to understand why when the Muslim community grows and yet we are not allowed to build. We are third of the population [in Acre] and over two thirds of the minority lives outside the city and not one mosque to serve them. Why does the old man need to go and pray in the Old City? ... I wanted to work quietly without publicity and public commotion ...but I do not need the Mayor and I do not need the Ministry of Interior Affairs! I have taken this decision by myself and by myself alone, because of all those people who sit at home and yearn to evoke memories and saw this mosque active and remember their father praying there (interview with Salim Najami, 26.12.2013)

Najami was able to alter and resist official planning through the sacred. Indeed he operated in Acre as others who have found themselves deprived, muted, and discarded within cities. They are contesting the growing influence of neo-liberal logic on urban planning as they increase their use of religion, religious buildings, and religious voices as mechanisms through which they establish and maintain

their presence in the city. Through these sites they form cracks, holes and crevices in the governing urban logic. Thus, Religious claims and religious buildings are increasing their influence on urban spaces and landscapes. As I am drawing to the end of this lecture I want to reiterate to my argument regarding the role of religion in urban spaces. I totally agree Orsi's (1985; 1999: 45) definition of "Urban religion," as "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." He captures the essence of the growing phenomena I was discussing here today urban spheres that are growingly changed and challenged by religious conceptions and organizations. Religion, as I argue, is a growing factor in the process of gray spacing and mounting importance of informality in cities. Religion in this case through the sacred is used as a socio-political platform through which politics of alterity may be developed and through which subaltern/excluded/marginal groups in cities are able to resist and challenge urban planning.