

Gray spacing and the Sacralization of Urban landscape: The Reconstruction of the Lababidi Mosque in Acre

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In this lecture I want to address recent theoretical explorations into informality and gray spaces in contemporary cities and urban theories. Further, I want to forge links between the growing informality of the city and religious resurgence and argue that religion through its sacred manifestations is becoming a way of marginalized groups to claim the city and make for an efficient tool for minority counter-hegemonic struggles. Following a theoretical discussion of informality and gray spaces I present the case of the recently renovated Lababidi mosque in Acre – which after a dormancy of 65 years that followed the dramatic geopolitical events of 1948 and the creation of Israel as a Jewish state was re-inscribed unto the urban landscape and functions again as a prayer house for the Muslim community. I will sum up my lecture with a few observations on informality and gray spaces and the growing importance of religion and sacrality for planners. But before I delve into the nub of my lecture I would like contextualize it against my own going research project: “Enchanted places on the Margin” in which I collaborate with Prof, Nurit Stadler, an anthropologist of religion at the Hebrew University and funded by the Israeli Science Foundation.

The idea of the project: Religion in the modern era abounds with pilgrimages and other mass gatherings that revolve around cult worship at graves, the sites of

¹ This lecture is accompanied with a PPT. I will gladly send it along via email upon demand.

apparitions and sacred relics. Together with pilgrimage to most popular established shrines like the Basilica of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Guadalupe in Mexico, Mecca in Saudi Arabia, new shrines are reinvented at the periphery, posing challenge to the reputable religious centers. This trend has not escaped the Holy Land (Israel/Palestine). As a center of religious passion and an historical network of sacred routes, the Holy Land is a place of religious innovation, all in all radicalized since the consolidation of the Zionism movement and the creation of the Jewish state therein. Thus, in concert with the intensification of established pilgrimage in places such as the Western Wall, Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy Sepulcher, the massive trend of reinvention of new places of worship is growing. Following Weber's ideas mostly of enchantment we focus mostly on the emergence of new places in the social and spatial periphery. These shrines and other religious spatial manifestations represent religious, political and geographical challenges to the well-known existing religious institutions. This process is based on the dynamic of the charisma, the stir of innovation, the sheer force behind the formation of new groups, ideas and places. The charisma at the enchanted margins is a sharp contrast to the religious core (Weber, 1968). **It is creative, innovative, and at times highly politicized.** Following these insights, in this project we explore places that are in process of creation, as a mirror to current conflicts and in the context of social resistance, local political traces, cultural innovations and the challenge to current dominant landscape. Our main argument is that the exploration of these sites in the 'process of becoming' (Pred 1984) provides us with a unique opportunity to look at the ways in which specific meanings/practices are articulated, contested and negotiated, by various religious groups within and against the background of the traditional institutions and the Jewish state. Further, these defining moments are crucial to understand the ways in which belief systems are inscribed unto the

sacred routes and landscape. We use the lenses of neo-Gramscian theories (Billings 1990) to critically read the term “enchanted spaces” a reading that sustain fusing different current cultural and structural theoretical horizons on political predominance, and power/ resistance relations in ethno-religious spaces. We follow, amongst others, Kong’s influential study regarding of the multivalence, ideological, contested and highly political nature of sacred sites due to their primal socio-spatial nature (1992, 1993a, 1993b, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006). In our project we develop a comparative methodology and theory to study Muslim/Christian/Jewish shrines in their creation. Thus, are project is comparative and multi sited. In recent years we have been exploring various places such as The Lady of the Separation Wall in Bethlehem, The tomb of Rachel, Rabbi Akiva’s wife, in Tiberias and Maqam Abu al-Hijja in the Lower Galilee. Our project is progressing and branching into various realms that follow our progressing joint theoretical path. Let us therefore plunge into one of our recent exploration; the study of the sacred within urban setting and its connection to the theoretical framing if informality and gray spacing. In this lecture I focus on the following question: How does religion serve as a driver for claiming city spaces and urban transformation? I explore how religious practices, discourse and buildings are used by religious minorities to claim the city and to participate more fully in the urban sphere.

Informality and Gray Spacing – theoretical perspectives

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”, I 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 I 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 I aim to demonstrate the city’s transformation in terms of its planning processes, everyday life, and politics. In what follows I will set the story of the Lababidi and its reconstruction in the context of the ethnocratic governing logic of modern Israeli planning and recent theoretical development of growing informality of the urban landscape.

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 Sects² 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. Salim Najami the new director of the trust was in charge of the renovation of the mosque and following its reopening and re-installment as an active compound in the city. 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 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

² i.e. non-Jewish religious groups in Israel.

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 want the restoration to pass it challenged the Jewish public sphere and responses were soon to follow on personal as well more official levels. Najami remained undeterred and followed through with the restoration against heavy pressures both covert and in the open. 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 discretely 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.

Concluding Remarks

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. The success of the mosque's role in enabling the (re)infiltration of a religious minority into Acre's landscape and daily existence provides a prime example of gray spacing and the political geography of informality in Acre. This, I argue, manifests the successful employment of religion by a marginalized minority to change the city and its spaces. Following Yiftachel's gray spacing and Roy's urban informality, I suggest that nowadays religion is a framework useful to formerly marginalized strangers to empower themselves and find their place within the city. Therefore people who find themselves deprived, muted, and dispossessed 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. The urban spaces landscape of Acre, as other cities worldwide, is becoming more strongly influenced by religious claims and religious buildings. 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). It is still to be further explored if planners can meet with these new challenges and claims of dispossessed groups who against the governing urban logic are demanding their 'right to the city'.