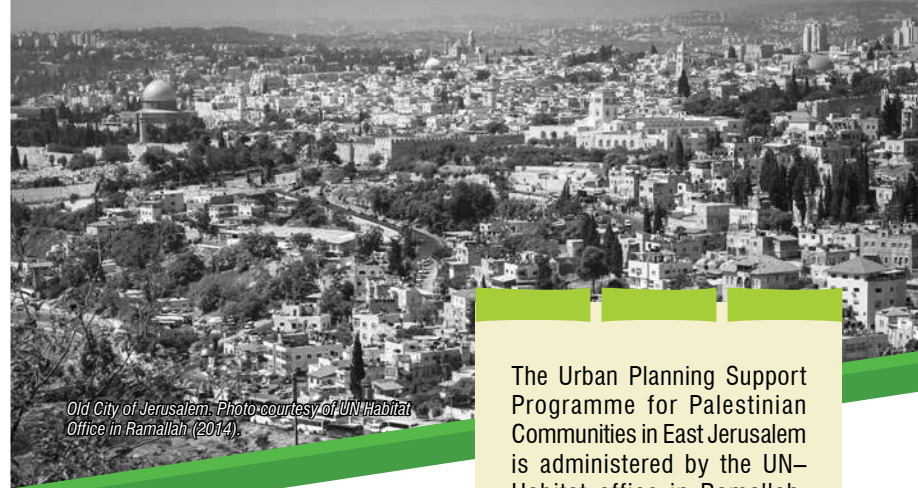# Habitat in Jerusalem

Old City of Jerusalem. Photo courtesy of UN Habitat Office in Ramallah (2014).

By Ahmad El-Atrash

Jerusalem has always been known as a cosmopolitan city, in which people from various socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious backgrounds have co-existed. Nevertheless, a rereading of its modern history reveals the dynamism of the spatial settings in the Holy City and its environs. As a heterogeneous urban environment during the nearly 400 years of Ottoman rule, Jerusalem was perceived as a "mixed city," wherein various modes of joint sociality among the different ethnic groups existed. Nowadays Jerusalem has become a "divided city" along ideological and political lines, where the many administrative and planning interventions of the Israeli authorities aim to facilitate the immigration of an ever-growing number of incoming Jews, who have infiltrated and proliferated in East Jerusalem's Arab Palestinian urban fabric. Once declared the "united city" under the 1980 Jerusalem Law, Jerusalem has by no means become Israel's united capital. At the economic level, Jerusalem has become Israel's poorest city (with 35 percent of families living below the poverty line), and at the social level, the stratification and division between secular Israelis and ultra-Orthodox Jews (more than 30 percent of Jerusalem's population) has become more problematic every day. To speak of a "united city" is erroneous.

The "traditional" habitat of Jerusalem city and its indigenous architecture has been fabricated by designing and building a "settler" habitat that gives dwellers/users the feeling that they are inhabiting traditional architecture, as if they were in the heart of the Old City. Herds of Israeli professionals (architects, planners, geographers, etc.) were saddled with the task of telling people less than the full story. Take, for example, the famous Israeli-Canadian architect, Moshe Safdie, who is well known for his design of

Habitat 67, a model community and housing complex in Montreal, Canada, that was touted as a showcase pavilion at Expo 67. This community-model complex was perceived as a new idea of architectural habitat, but many view it to be the ugliest complex in Canada. He joined Israeli efforts to rebuild Jerusalem in 1970 and decided to do so mostly in areas that evoked provocation and undermined the very concept of habitat. Safdie designed the controversial Modi'in city in 1989, and the Alrov Mamilla Quarter, including the infamous Mamilla Mall, in 1993, both located in what is known as no-man's-land.

The public facilities of the newly imposed "settler" habitat in the city have had military connotations, beyond the conventional socio-cultural associations of modern cities. The Hebrew University at Mount Al-Swana (aka, Mount Scopus) is one example. The site has been strategically kept under Israeli control even during the Jordanian rule over the eastern part of the city (1948–1967). It represented a symbol of existence for the Jewish identity of Jerusalem. After 1967, Israeli architects and planners designed and developed a new university campus that served the purpose of higher education, as well as formidable military fortification. The Israeli political geographer Elisha Efrat made it clear

The Urban Planning Support Programme for Palestinian Communities in East Jerusalem is administered by the UN–Habitat office in Ramallah, in collaboration with Fiona McCluney (M Phil), Lubna Shaheen (PhD), and Anjad Hithnawi (M. Arch). This three-year programme aims to ease displacement pressures and facilitate the immediate improvement of living conditions within Palestinian communities while at the same time securing growth opportunities for the inhabitants. More specifically, the programme is designed to assist East Jerusalemites in securing tangible development and building opportunities by generating planning solutions that address the various urban challenges faced by Palestinians. In addition, the programme aims to increase awareness concerning planning and building rights.

how the design motif of the new campus was based on the idea that the complex would be the eastern bulwark of the city, and that each part of the complex would offer support for the other units in case of attack. For this reason, a tall concrete tower in the middle of the complex was designed to offer communication and observation support, with a view over the entire eastward Rift Valley.

Hebrew University. Photo courtesy of UN Habitat Office in Ramallah (2014).

Likewise, the design motif had limited outside access and provided a complex network of tunnels, interior corridors, and underground entrances along approximately two kilometres of inter-connected structures built of stone and concrete. This has indeed created a kind of fearsome Kafkaesque reality where such a "public" facility has negatively affected the indigenous habitat of the city. Ironically enough, nearby Palestinian neighbourhoods have mostly been denied access to such "public" facilities.

The question remains: How could the Israeli military, as well as civilian professionals, fabricate the "settler" habitat in East Jerusalem?

It is quite difficult to establish a line of causality to this question without considering the regulatory framework that was utilised. In East Jerusalem, laws and regulations are actually bypassed. For Palestinian architects and planners, the *de facto* regulatory framework is usually ignored since it is not coherent with local needs and aspirations. By the same token, the Israeli architects and planners do not take these laws and regulations as a "fixed" guiding strategy for spatial development. Time and time again they have demonstrated that this regulatory framework is "flexible" and has changed accordingly to suit their needs and aspirations. An appalling example in this regard is what has befallen the Israeli settlement of Rekhes Shufat (Ramat Shlomo), which was expropriated from the private ownership of Arab Palestinians in 1970 and designated as an open green area. In 1990 it was suddenly changed into a residential settlement for the exclusive use of ultra-Orthodox Jews. This has created a state of exception, where the "illegal" may retroactively be justified as "legal" by the Israeli authorities. Nevertheless, history teaches us that any law that contradicts social needs is eventually bound to become obsolete.

Palestinians in East Jerusalem, like their peers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, increasingly perceive the staccato peace talks as a game plan that will eventually wreak havoc on both sides and perpetuate this implacable conflict. The key to success would be a consensus on the proposed boundaries to separate Jerusalem along ethnic and political lines in the short run, and, in the long run, the more sustainable solution of reviving Jerusalem as the "mixed city" it was years ago. Hope for the future is contained in this remarkable history! The cultural landscape, however, must be restored to its former pristine condition, where all inhabitants are guaranteed a "right to the city." This might not necessitate effacing existing construction or uprooting the present inhabitants, but it must entail the repatriation of Palestinian refugees who are clustered in underdeveloped refugee camps in the diaspora.

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