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Book Review: Violent Acts and Urban Space in Contemporary Tel Aviv: Revisioning Moments

Elizabeth Mavroudi

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ageing society, already a feature of inner-city Kobe at the time the earthquake struck, and bearing in mind the suffering caused to the elderly by the Tōhoku tsunami, it will be fascinating indeed to see how the Japanese government and planning authorities devise and implement policies that make living spaces more resilient in the face of disaster.

Paul Waley
University of Leeds

Violent Acts and Urban Space in Contemporary Tel Aviv: Revisioning Moments

Tali Hatuka, 2010

Austin, TX: University of Texas Press

248pp. US\$55.00 hardback

ISBN 978 0 292 72185 2 hardback

Written primarily from a planning and architectural perspective, this theoretically informed book discusses whether ‘revisioning’ moments after violent acts can instigate discussion and negotiation about the value of urban space. It also considers how it can be made meaningful for residents and, potentially, open up avenues for imagining space in shared and constructive ways. Using both urban and socio-political theory, the book is written with a diverse audience in mind. In part, Hatuka seems to be asking planners and architects to engage with the consequences of their actions and to make academics aware of the role and difficulties that planners and architects have.

There is a useful forward by Diane E. Davis who stresses the need for ‘new urbanisms’ that privilege power sharing, communication and negotiation rather than the “continual jockeying for national political power through struggles over the control of space” (p. xii), something that she feels has to stop. This sets the stage for a book in which Tel Aviv is used as a case study to

analyse how violence disrupts and shapes urban space and, in the process, it discusses how urban development, planning and governance are linked and respond to violence.

The case study of Tel Aviv is an important and relevant one and Hatuka focuses in great detail on three acts of violence in the city: the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Malchei Israel Square (renamed Rabin square after the event), the suicide bombing at the Dolphinarium discothèque in 2001 on Tel Aviv beach and the suicide bombings at the central bus station in 2003 in the Neve Shaanan neighbourhood.

Using numerous photos and city plans, Hatuka demonstrates in detail the historical urban development of the three case study areas and examines the impacts of government and private capital in the planning, architecture and visions of these areas. She stresses the top-down power convergences between capital and governance that take place in favour of bottom-up public debate and negotiation on the future and meaning of specific urban spaces. This lack of public participation is posited as a problem and Hatuka emphasises that there is a need for planners and architects to consider their own role in perpetuating structures of power and inequality that exclude rather than include local residents and, in particular, those who are potentially marginalised. Thus, Hatuka seems committed to trying to create equitable social change and is concerned with how planners, architects and urban designers can help achieve this, both in Tel Aviv and elsewhere. Acknowledging the challenges involved in doing this, Hatuka uses violence to demonstrate how particular destructive acts create urban change as a result of how different stakeholders such as local government officials, companies and planners respond to them.

In Rabin Square, this has meant that the square has become a site of commemoration where attempts to ‘preserve’ memory have

taken place. However, there are now contested visions over what the space should be and become—for example, plans have been drawn up for an underground car-park. This demonstrates different approaches to space, ranging from the pragmatic to symbolic and sacred but also that such visions are not inclusive; there is “non-participation of certain groups (e.g. Israeli Arabs, Palestinians and foreign workers)” (p. 68).

The ‘shoreline’ where the Dolphinarium is located, is a border, in-between area positioned between Jewish Tel Aviv and Arab Jaffa. The area has been subject to processes of separation and connection as well as different visions and developments which have led to a synergy between “capital, state and city” culminating in Atarim Square, which “clearly encourages consumerism” (p. 112). After the bombing, Tel Aviv Council put forward plans for the Dolphinarium site and the violence has thus created a debate on the future of the space. However, Hatuka feels that commercial interests have prevailed and that “architecture often caters to the demands of authority and capital and disregards citizens” (p. 118). Therefore, as a result of the violence, the “opportunity for change and revision” to offer “novel opportunities” (p. 76) has been missed as “different groups have become more alienated” (p. 76).

In the eyes of Hatuka, the bombing at the central bus station in Neve Shaanan provides another example of the relationships between capitalism, architecture and urban planning. The bus station was opened in 1993 after a controversial and lengthy building period; it was designed to be “A City under one Roof” (p. 138) and was representative of the large-area top-down planning processes of 1960s Tel Aviv. Neve Shaanan has now become an area for immigrants from all over the world and as a result of this the City Council has decided to celebrate such diversity with a plan called ‘The Meeting Place’ in order to

increase encounters between different groups but also for touristic purposes. However, Hatuka states that

under the guise of ‘local knowledge’, architects and planners are acting in marginal spaces without engaging in their daily lives or comprehending their multiplicity (p. 149).

Thus current plans are creating lines of separation by ‘fixing’ and ‘ordering’ the different groups that live in the area. Therefore, this becomes a contested space where local residents both comply with and resist attempts to control them and where violence has become a “tool of negotiation through which ‘outside’ groups, but also those within a regime, battle over meaning” (p. 156).

Using the city of Tel Aviv as a case study to examine violence and urban space is an impressive yet challenging task and I feel that Hatuka does rise to the occasion. Hatuka’s concern appears to be with how planners and architects can carve out a role that combines vision, urban design and social justice. In the process, she stresses the role of citizenship and of negotiations and struggles over memory, place and identity by different stakeholders. However, although she discusses power inequalities, I felt that more could have been done to explain the reasons why these power relations exist in the first place and, indeed, why violence occurs in the context of Tel Aviv and Israel as a whole.

Hatuka discusses how citizenship should be made more meaningful (for example, on page 168). Citizenship can indeed become a tool for empowerment and political participation in urban areas but the book could have analysed this aspect further to show, for example, how more inclusive, flexible notions of citizenship could help to ensure it is more meaningful for Israel’s complex, dynamic, diverse and unequal society, not all of whom

are Israeli citizens. It is worth mentioning here that the book assumes that readers will have a good level of knowledge about the history of the area, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and Israeli society and, as a result, it does not provide a great deal of background information on such aspects.

On the whole, I admire the book for how it deals with a difficult and emotive topic; I also share the author's belief that urban space has radical potential for inclusion and social justice. There is a need for planners and urban designers to recognise the historical and contextual aspects of space and place and, in the process, to question and critique ideologically, economically and politically motivated uses of the urban environment that serve to divide rather than unite people.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the book is its examination of the contested nature of urban space and how violent acts become appropriated within visions and processes of urban development that serve élites and private capital rather than those diverse communities 'on the ground'. However, I do feel that there is a need for further analysis of such 'voices' and how they respond to 'top-down' planning practices and urban design. This is particularly important in places like Tel Aviv, where sites are contested and where there are unequal power relations within and between communities. Although the book does pay attention to this, particularly in relation to Neve Shaanan, it would have been interesting to hear such voices more strongly. However, this is probably beyond the scope of such a book.

I would also have liked to see the book make a stronger statement about how urban space, planners and architects can help to create geographies of similarity, sharing and communication, rather than separation and division, even when faced with terrible acts of violence. In the conclusion, Hatuka states that

Israel's architectural and planning discourse sees the Palestinian–Israeli situation as opposing one another. This binary opposition (occupier and occupied, guilty and just) has moved away from the core issue of human society inhabiting space, from the creation of mutual habitation patterns, and from enhancing similarities as well as differences (p.170).

This is an important challenge facing those Israelis and Palestinians who wish not only to see an equitable and long-lasting resolution to the current conflict, but who also imagine a future in which us/them relationships are lessened and space is used to unite, rather than divide, people.

Elizabeth Mavroudi

*Department of Geography
Loughborough University*

Power at the Roots: Gentrification, Community Gardens, and the Puerto Ricans of the Lower East Side

Miranda J. Martinez, 2010

Plymouth: Lexington Books

180 pp. £37.95 hardback; £44.95 ebook

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The struggle for survival of New York community gardens in the late 1990s has been the topic of quite a number of recent academic publications (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith and Kurtz, 2003; Hassell, 2005; Staeheli *et al.*, 2002). Those contributions have dealt with the benefits of community gardening, the struggle around the public/private divide in land use conflicts, the politics of scale, their role in community and grass-roots urban movements, their diversity especially in terms of the ethnic backgrounds of those who tend them, etc.