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# IMAGINATION AS A METHOD FOR GENERATING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT POSSIBLE URBAN FUTURES

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## Imagination as critical thinking

Utopian ideals have not always been relegated to the sidelines in planning and architectural practice. In fact, imagining dramatically different alternative futures for cities was once a standard element of planning theory and practice. From Plato and Aristotle's ideal republics to the more recent utopian visions associated with leading voices in western architecture and planning (e.g., Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Lewis Mumford, Le Corbusier and Paul Goodman), the imaginative search for novel physical or discursive renderings of a desired state of affairs has persisted throughout the ages. The creative visions emerging from these practices have influenced the form and character of contemporary cities, mainly because of their potential for improving the welfare of individuals and communities. *The garden city* by Ebenezer Howard and *Ville radieuse* by Le Corbusier are key theoretical examples of the apparently utopian projects<sup>1</sup> that influenced twentieth-century architecture and urbanism before falling into disrepute from the late 1950s onward.<sup>2</sup>

Despite their defining influence in the field, charges of authoritarian excess and tensions between advocates of "planning from above" and "planning from below" derailed the creative search for utopia, bringing alternative strategies to the table (Davidoff, 1965; Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997; Innes, 1998). In more recent years, citizen participation, communicative practices, and strategies of stakeholder negotiations that recognise the importance of including social groups and non-government organizations in the planning processes have joined the repertoire of planning methodologies. Planners today usually draw on a range of these now-standardised methods to produce "local knowledge" of the urban experience, a key component in the generation of agreed-upon urban policy outcomes. However, the local knowledge produced through such processes can constrain as well as enable effective planning action, particularly when social and spatial inequalities mediate the urban experience in ways that produce stark divisions over the most appropriate urban policy action. More critically, in the decision to rely on the grounded, everyday experience of citizens as the principal reference point for planning action, many of the imaginative dimensions of planning have disappeared and been

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of Planning Research Methods Account: s7347354 replaced by results-oriented techniques and a preoccupation with proving accountability to citizens and their immediate priorities.

Our aim here is to bring creative visioning back into the planning lexicon. Building on a recent manifesto by Mostafavi and Christensen (2012) about the importance of constructive imagination, we argue that future visioning can be a "method" deployed by planners and designers to generate knowledge about the city as well as to assess the limits and possibilities of effective planning action. We begin by proposing an analytical framework for exploring the role of imagination, asking whether citizens' conceptualisations of time, space, and change enable them to construct alternative visions. In this exercise, imagination is perceived neither as a naïve celebration of utopian thinking nor as a futile exercise in futurism. Rather, imaginative visioning is used as a methodological tool to enable and expose uncensored views about the hopes and desires of citizens for their cities. At its best, such visioning exercises can produce a critical understanding of real-world institutional and political-economic constraints, while at the same time nurturing the hope that the future can be different. At their worst, they can reveal the misperceptions, intransigence, and biases of citizens and other stakeholders, although these, too, must be recognised as key elements in the planning process because of their role in reducing consensus and setting limits on action (Aalbers, 2011). Our premise is that by offering citizens a chance to imagine a different and better future, rather than asking them to work pragmatically within the limitations of the present, new ideas will be generated both for urban policy action and for research on the construction of alternative social, political, and spatial arrangements for cities. As Lefebvre (1996, 147) noted, any useful critique of "really existing" human geography or the practices of contemporary urbanism will necessarily entail both imagination and the need for creative activity through information, symbolism, prophesy, and play. We could not agree more.

Although imaginative visioning methods can produce valuable knowledge for planners in all settings, they are particularly effective in locations where patterns of extreme social exclusion and urban injustice characterise the urban domain. In such settings, citizens often feel constrained by the grounded social realities and the power structures of the present, mainly because animosity, antagonism, and mistrust often create limited faith in the capacity of authorities or fellow neighbours to build a city that could be embraced by all. In such cities, consensusoriented planning techniques may be least useful, because they either hide – or fail to reveal – the deep divides and tensions that lurk beneath the surface of formal planning exercises (Davis and Hatuka, 2011). Given these constraints, the turn to imagination as a method for soliciting deeply held views about alternative urban futures may be one of the few tools available for uncovering effective possibilities and enabling a multiplicity of socially just outcomes for highly contested cities (Massey, 2005). Once armed with both critical insight and a wider template of possibilities produced through visioning exercises, planners will be better able to identify planning goals in ways that may not be immediately obvious through consensus exercises and that may, in fact, transcend conflicts that can derail planning practice when stark social differences predominate.

In making this argument about the role of imagination, we base our knowledge on data generated in the course of an experimental project called the *Just Jerusalem Competition*, which used visioning to generate non-conventional planning strategies for that city. The turn to imaginative visioning in the case of Jerusalem was built on the assumption that in divided or aggressively contested cities such as this one, there was a need to transcend the partisan constraints of the present and orient towards the future if any exit from cycles of seemingly intractable conflict is to be achieved. This experiment, which took the form of an international "ideas" competition that called on citizens rather than state actors to offer future strategies for the city, solicited new visions that would enable a just, peaceful, and sustainable Jerusalem by the year 2050. Launched in January 2007, potential entrants had one year to design, develop, and submit their ideas to an

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open website housed at MIT, with jury deliberations beginning three months after the competition closed in early 2008.<sup>5</sup>

In the remainder of this chapter, we build on findings from the *Just Jerusalem* project to propose a general framework for tracking citizen views and enabling the production of novel or inventive ideas that can be effectively incorporated into new forms of planning research and action. We begin by discussing a range of principles that could be used to frame solicitation of – and research on – imagination in conflict cities and elsewhere. We then suggest a method for mapping and analysing the findings. In the final section we discuss the importance of imagination as a planning method, and discuss its potential to produce hope and an expanded array of constructive actions that might build better urban futures.

## How to stimulate imagination

Citizens unhappy with conditions in their city often seek change; but how they do so, and through what measures, will inevitably be limited by the social and political facts on the ground. In conflict cities, years of raised expectations and dashed hopes have taken their toll, often discouraging further activism or efforts. In such conditions, the starting point for soliciting new proposals for a better urban future must begin with open discussion on the city, including what might be reformulated as a range of "non-expert" or "non-local" visions about alternative possibilities. As people articulate their hopes and dreams, it is critical to ask them to think about the following questions: Do they see a role for experimentation in the production of place; how do they approach time, space, and change in the city; and if so, what terminology best describes their current living environment and the preferred urban future? To solicit answers to these questions, planners also must be willing to use different methods (interviews, questionnaires) and cultural representations (planning ideas, master plans, media programmes, newspapers) to stimulate imagination and to generate a range of data and metaphors about possible futures that can be translated into actionable planning ideas. To a certain degree, the most useful framing questions will be specific to place. In the case of Jerusalem, this entailed soliciting visions and ideas that addressed boundaries and borders, governance structures, and the relationship between city and nation. All cities have historical reference points - whether social spatial, political, or economic - that live in the imagination of their citizens and that must be tapped through the visioning process. Even so, there are several analytical principles that can serve as guides in any visioning exercise, whether asked of citizens or of professional planners in a conflict city or elsewhere, each of which will call attention to the scale or the boundaries of the visioning exercise as well as its temporality.

Principle #1: Deconstruct perceptions of the city. Is the city seen as a reflection of society, a subject of governance, or a collection of divergent sites for neighbourhood-based claims? Some of the most intractable and enduring contestations in cities revolve around social and spatial inequalities in the distribution of urban goods, amenities, and services (Bollens, 2000; Beall, Crankshaw, and Parnell, 2002). To the extent that participatory planning techniques produce a fragmented array of spatially bounded claims, they may reinforce social and spatial differences at the level of the city, even when the democratically deliberated claims of a single community are achieved – precisely because the gains of one community may mean losses for another (Hillier, 2003; Mouffe, 1999). One way to overcome such distortions is to ask citizens and planners to imagine what planning practices will be best for all inhabitants of a city rather than asking just a few, no matter their physical location. This is a key question for many cities, with looming environmental challenges that call into question the functioning and resource consumption of cities in their entirety. Likewise, once the city is conceived to be a reflection

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of society, imaginative practices can be marshalled to construct a vision for the society or city that best reflects the needs and desires of all its citizens (Amin, 2006; Friedman, 2000, Fainstein, 2010), using future ideas about the good city to work backwards towards an array of spatial forms and uses that best enable the achievement of this vision. The challenge is to imagine futures based on humanistic, inclusive ideas that recognise the relationships between the inhabitants of a city and its formal institutions as well as its lived spaces.

Principle #2: Question the nature and role of stakeholders. Do citizens consider themselves as part of a larger whole, or as individuals who retreat to the local sphere? The call to imaginative practice as a concept derives from the works of Henri Lefebvre and John Rawls, each of whom were deeply concerned with universal rights (Lefebvre, 1996; Rawls, 1993, 1999). To achieve universality in thought and deed, and to increase the likelihood of visioning an inclusive and socially just future, imaginative exercises should be expanded to all who might have an interest in a particular city. In more specific terms, this means that the possibility of imagining a different urban future should extend in scale from the smallest to the largest unit of society, with the different insights generated from these divergent spatial vantage points combining to produce the most universal ideas about a better urban future. This means that imaginative exercises should draw on the larger terrain of national and global civil society whenever possible, rather than remaining confined to a particular city's (or neighbourhood's) current residents. The major epistemological challenge associated with this parameter is its intellectual justification: Why widen the potential "planning" audience beyond the neighbourhood or city itself? The rationale for doing so is built partly on recognition of the changing nature of cities and citizenship in today's globalised world, in which both local and transnational citizenries struggle for recognition, rights, and identities. The contemporary era suggests that global imagination is already a reality, with policymakers, architects, and planners acting globally in a variety of ways, such as designing, developing, and appropriating models and experiences from cities all over the world. However, the logic also rests in a deeper understanding of highly contested cities. By opening the imagination process to civil society at scales of participation beyond a single city itself, it will be easier to minimise the stalemate that comes when only those residing in that city are involved. In addition to reducing the biases or self-censorship that may come from being tied to existent localities, power structures, or institutions in a city, opening the dialogue to include global civil society provides citizens from around the world the opportunity to deepen and expand their knowledge about the social, political, and economic conditions in other cities.

Principle #3: Critically examine the territorial scale of planning action. What are the limits that city boundaries impose on the creation of equitable and socially just urban experiences? This question has been extensively discussed by legal theorist Gerald Frug (2001), who comes to similar conclusions about the challenges to democracy and social justice that arise when cities are dominated by states or are not allowed to "gather" – to use Lefebvre's notion – the multiple localities and social collectivities that constitute a society. However, in a departure from many other theorists of urban democracy, especially those who build on the Tocquevillian tradition of reifying "partial" or exclusive groupings as the bedrock of democracy (whether in neighbourhoods, communities, or other smaller-scale territorial units), Frug advocates for empowerment and autonomy on much larger territorial scales than the formal city. In particular, he ties the search for a truly egalitarian and democratic project to a better understanding of new territorialities that are larger than the neighbourhood or city but smaller than the nation and sub-national states. In fact, Frug goes so far as to suggest that the legal contours of

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overly localised power prevent cities from fulfilling their democratic and civil society function by turning them into "vehicles for separating and dividing different types of people rather than bringing them together, withdrawal from public life rather than engagement with others, and the multiplication of private spaces instead of walkable streets and public parks" (2001: 8-9). Such concerns are also pre-eminent in highly conflicted cities, particularly when groups in conflict are located or segregated in different corners of the urban fabric and when issues about the boundaries of the city are part of the source of the conflict. Among such cities, Jerusalem may be most known for this problematic conflict, with much of the struggle fuelled by competing views of what are the most appropriate spatial (or territorial) boundaries of urban policymaking, and whether they are coincident with political boundaries or sovereignties or even with the symbolic and cultural bases and boundaries of governance for the city (i.e., whose religion, culture, or law should prevail, and how, when, or where should they prevail). As a general concern and constraint, however, many cities face the problem of how to draw boundaries for policymaking action, with such issues apparent in controversies over redlining and political re-districting, to name but a few. Questions about who draws institutional and/or spatial boundaries on city activities and for what purposes have long affected the utility of the participatory planning process, primarily by reinforcing scales and locations for policymaking that favour some groups over others. Critically examining the territorial logic of conventional planning action is a key component of imaginative visioning.

Principle #4: Specify and prioritise the relationship between the whole and the parts. In cities we see contestation not only over symbols, infrastructure, and resources but also over jobs, housing, transportation, water, and other requisites of the built environment. Questions of governance and civic authority likewise draw considerable attention as political allegiances mix with citizenship and established environmental priorities to drive desired urban policy outcomes (Miraftab, 2004; Roy, 2006). Given the multiple activities that create urban spaces, those who seek to imagine alternative possibilities must think carefully about prioritising which of these various domains should be the subject of action, and in the process, they should use their imagination to cultivate a reflexivity about which sectoral activities are most or least likely to contribute to a better city. What a conventional urban planner might identify as a key problem for resolution - perhaps because her domain of action is bureaucratically circumscribed by given structures, processes, and resources, such as an affordable housing stock or transportation infrastructure - may or may not be a good entry point for visioning a different future. Given the fact that cities are sites of multiple activities, services, infrastructures, and institutions that contribute to or constrain liveability in complex and, at times, in contradictory ways, it is important to track the different ways a city's main activities are framed in space and time. The logic here is not just the importance of thinking about the "whole" and the "parts" of the city but how they might more constructively relate to each other. Also important is the need to transcend the traditional planning practices that take either one or the other sectoral vantage point in the search for action. While comprehensive or master planning may engage the whole of the city, by laying out a systematic but relatively abstract organizational or spatial logic to integrate all urban activities, such planning leaves the complexity of managing a city's constantly moving "parts" to individual transport, community, or housing specialists. Imaginative exercises should be used to rethink the causal relations among the moving parts by inviting new ideas about how to make connections between sectors or the territorial spaces in which they operate and the city as a whole.

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#### Mapping modalities: analysing the gathered data

What will be achieved by introducing imaginative methods into planning that build on a better understanding of the foregoing principles? For one thing, a body of ideas and approaches towards space and change can lay the foundation for future research about a city and what its citizens see as desirable in that city. For another, this body of ideas can serve as the basis for mapping knowledge that is of utmost importance to planners, who must then translate multiple desires into actionable policies that accommodate the largest array of stakeholders.

Using discourse analysis, it is possible to map and assess the data about possible urban futures in two ways that are useful to planners. One is by (1) recognising and then analysing the range or extent of imagination, or what we might call the "mode of orientation," defined as the extent to which a proposed idea appears conventional or predictable, as opposed to whether it offers a non-conventional and imaginative way of thinking about the city. A second is by (2) examining and understanding whether certain transformative themes or new ideas for a city are at all contingent on views of space or time, and then specifying these assumptions and articulating the connections (see Figure 3.9.1).

In terms of mode of orientation, we suggest categorising distinct "modes" of orientation along a continuum that reflects the most *pragmatic and most utopian ideas*, and then identifying yet a third category of ideas that explicitly transcends the pragmatic-utopian divide, from which *visionary* ideas might emerge. The following parameters are useful in distinguishing which ideas fall into what categories (see Figure 3.9.2):

- Position on the city's socio-institutional structure. Does the proposed vision accept, avoid, or reconfigure current realities? Stated differently, does the person doing the imagining accept the existing sociopolitical situation and work with conventional assumptions about power and institutions; or does she avoid the existing sociopolitical situation by showing an unwillingness to consider any changes that might disrupt the larger dynamics of power or reconfigure the existing sociopolitical situation by challenging conventional assumptions? Are visions focused on tangible activities, feasible processes, and identifiable outcomes as opposed to more abstract ideas?
- 2 Approach to territorial space. Does the approach to space represent a willingness to consider multiple or non-conventional scales or sites of intervention, as well as a flexible approach to territory? How are spatial entry points identified? Do they start with boundaries and borders that are well established as opposed to those yet to be determined?

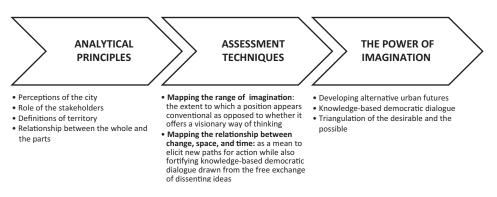


Figure 3.9.1 Framework for generating knowledge about possible urban futures.

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3 Conceptions of the past, present, and future and the temporal orientation towards change. Here it is also important to differentiate between approaches that are pushing for immediate change and those that are more abstract, specifically future-oriented positions. Are proposed visions about recovering the past, reinforcing the present, or enabling a new future?

It may be worth noting that in the case of the Just Jerusalem Competition, even despite the project's stated aim of generating novel ideas that could straddle or bridge the pragmatic-utopian divide, the majority of respondents failed to strike that balance. In fact, the competition entries split relatively equally among these three modes of orientation. Slightly more than one-third of the entries followed a more conventionally pragmatic planning approach (forty-five pragmatic), forming the largest category of entries. The remaining two-thirds of the competitors adopted a more imaginative approach, although more competitors preferred utopian ideas with little reference to reality (forty utopian) than visionary ideas that sought to connect tangible actions to more imaginative concepts (thirty-six visionary). This was a surprising outcome, yet through this type of data analysis new knowledge was gained about the discursive and epistemological barriers associated with planning for the city.

Beyond mapping modes of orientation, it is also helpful to document the all-encompassing themes that emerged in the process of analysing the new ideas, new discourses, or new realities generated through the visioning process. To the extent that these large themes have discursive meaning, or could be seen as a call for challenging existing mechanics of the city, for confronting inequality, and for pushing authorities to be bolder and more transformative in their aims, they are useful renderings of citizen views of both the city and the planning processes more generally. In the case of Just Jerusalem, the competition revealed several "mega" themes and narratives about the city's essential character and its predominant dilemmas, which future planners must be prepared to take into account, whether in terms of recognition or repudiation. Specifically, most competitors observed Jerusalem through one of three distinct lenses: as a city that was either connected or fragmented, as a city whose fate depended on a shared past or a shared future, or as a city whose significance rested in its symbolic as opposed to its real character (Davis and Hatuka, 2011). Not all visions fit neatly into one or the other end of these seeming dichotomies (i.e., some saw translating a shared past into a shared future as key), and many visions adopted a combination of concerns with space, time, and meaning in a single meta-narrative. However, as larger framing

Table 3.9.1 Mapping modes of orientation towards place

	Accepting	Avoiding	Reconfiguring
Suggested Action Framework	Local, bottom-up, a particular location for action.	Static, top-down, escapist, no conflicts/paradoxes	Multiple scales and times, paradoxical
Conception of Space	Local, Intimate, Familiar	Abstract, Virtual, Hegemonic	Unspecified, Relational
Conception of Time	Present oriented, short- term; emphasis on ideas where effects of change are evident immediately	identifiable markers	Future-oriented but concretely; identification of actions that explicitly lead to a different future

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devices, they provided substantial information about how Jerusalem was seen by those who cared most about it.

The value of extracting meta-narratives and mapping degrees of imagination rests not just in its contribution to further discussion about possible urban futures, but also in its capacity to provide a set of freely formed ideas that can help strengthen democratic dialogue and more equitable outcomes, themselves key objectives of the planning process. As David Harvey has suggested, the right to the city is "not merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart's desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image" (Harvey 2000, 939). Because such vastly humanist aims cannot always be readily achieved by conventionally pragmatic planning methods, letting citizens' imaginations jump-start discussion about the city is one of the best ways to guarantee such goals. As Lefebvre asked, "Why should the imaginary enter only outside the real instead of nurturing reality? When there is a loss of thought in and by the imaginary, it is being manipulated. The imagination is also a social fact" (Lefebvre 1996, 167). Social facts, both "real" and imaginative, create the landscape of cities, conflict-ridden or otherwise, and thus they can and should be the basis around which planning action unfolds. Imaginative visioning builds on the premise that perceptions about what is desirable for a city can also be considered "social facts," albeit ones that could not have been arrived at through conventional planning techniques and consensus processes. For planners, of course, the point is not merely to understand the facts but also to change them. Yet to do so, both imagination and practical action built on imaginative visions may be necessary. Mapping alternative visions and discursive metaphors provides a basis for extracting and identifying fundamental meta-narratives of the city in question, particularly the conflicting meta-narratives that so often lurk under the radar screen of conventional planning practice, either unspoken or unacknowledged, which are then used by planners to help achieve the realization of citizens' most noble desires.

## Conclusion: the potential uses of grounded imagination

How exactly does soliciting and documenting imagination open up alternative urban futures? For one, imagination has discursive meaning and can, accordingly, be perceived as a call for protest, for challenging existing representations of the city, for confronting injustice, and for saying the unsayable without the constraints of censorship, whether self-imposed or otherwise. For another, mapping trajectories of imagination holds the potential to open new windows of understanding on citizens' true desires in ways that force planners themselves to be more innovative in their own practice. To be sure, the more distant the planner and citizen from the reality the freer they may be to imagine, but also the less practical they may be. When planners incorporate imaginative thinking generated from citizens with their own professional knowledge of planning constraints, they are in a better position to give policy life to the concept of "grounded imagination" in ways that can serve as the basis for planning more inclusive cities. Such a method does not aim to find a negotiated "solution" for a city, but rather seeks to inspire imaginative ideas that can open alternative or innovative ways for discussing and eventually dealing with urban policies. And by standing in contrast to conventional planning practice, such a method is both liberating and constructive, particularly in highly contested urban environments where the "usual" planning approaches such as negotiation or consensus-building (Bond, 2011; Hillier, 2003; Mouffe, 1999) may produce very little urban change because such practices are built on the acceptance of the authority of given institutions or on the legitimacy of certain

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of Planning Research Methods Account: s7347354 territorially circumscribed governing arrangements. Indeed, in such settings standard planning practices like negotiation or consensus-building can even reverse constructive imagination because, by insisting on finding an agreed-upon solution, the desires and creative imagination of participants are jettisoned in the search for a single, negotiated view — even efforts to impose a homogeneous set of urban priorities may be precisely what is driving urban dissatisfaction in the first place.

Stated simply, by soliciting and enabling imagination, planners can achieve a better understanding of the basic urban conditions that enable or constrain a city's inhabitants - no matter their location or identity - to find common cause. In urban situations where local governing authorities are more powerful than the planners in establishing the terms of negotiation, and where citizens have starkly conflicting urban priorities, imagination may in fact be the only effective tool available for constructing a shared terrain of agreement. Moreover, constructive imagination as a conceptual framing for the planning of cities can take us one step closer to achieving more socially inclusive cities (Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010), where envisioning a better city becomes a truly shared task. Constructive imagination without an audience is socially meaningless, but constructive imagination that is documented, shared, and incorporated into planning processes is inspiring to citizens and planners alike. For this reason imagination must be solicited, precisely because it is a message of hope that the future can be different. Like all messages, the more public this communication and the more engaging, provocative, and sellable the ideas, the more likely it is that these messages will have staying power. At the end of the day, imagination, as well as the capacity to communicate the value of novel ideas, is not merely a tool for planners. It is also a key tool in the arsenal of weapons used to construct world views and to understand and reconfigure our cities and the societies of which they are a part.

#### **Notes**

- 1 On questioning the extent to which Howard, Wright, and Le Corbusier all projected urban utopias, see Robert Fishman, *Urban utopias in the twentieth century*.
- 2 For further reading on utopian visions in western architecture and planning, see Nathaniel Coleman, Utopias and architecture, and Robert Fishman, Urban utopias in the twentieth century. For criticism of utopian visions in architecture and planning, see Manfredo Tafuri, Architecture and utopia, and Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, Collage city.
- 3 When visionary exercises are deployed in standard planning practice, they usually come in the form of top-down exercises in which planners and architects introduce self-created models of a preferred urban future, generally built around a tangible or readily implementable project and followed by a reactive response from citizens who, in turn, exercise their right to comment and critique. The result tends to be a well-managed if not sterile and highly unimaginative dialogue that lacks the basic qualities of visioning and sidelines fundamental societal transformation. Such processes usually generate a commitment to pragmatic and incremental gains, both of which tend to reproduce the power differences between those charged with the juridical authority to plan the city and those who are only in a position to accept, critique, or perhaps even modify such plans.
- 4 The competition was the culminating stage of a long-term project (started in 2004) titled *Jerusalem 2050: Visions for a Place of Peace*, developed by the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in conjunction with the Center for International Studies at MIT. We the authors were directly involved in the development of this project and later became part of a subgroup of the steering committee who contributed to the design and analysis of the competition.
- 5 Most of this information is documented on the Jerusalem 2050 website (http://web.mit.edu/cis/jeru salem2050/ and http://video.mit/channel/jerusalem-2050/) (accessed 5 August 2014). Visit this site for more elaboration on the project, the jury, and the competition specifications, and for a closer evaluation of the entries to the competition (discussed in greater detail by entry number in the chapter's final section).

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