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Transcending the Utopian-Pragmatic Divide in Conflict Cities: Applying Vision and Imagination to Jerusalem's Future

Setting the Stage

Jerusalem is a crucial part of the process towards a peaceful future, but the conflict itself has roots and branches reaching beyond the boundaries of the city, and even far outside of Israeli and Palestinian Territories.

Therefore our considerations had to go beyond the city limits.

— SIGI ATTENERER and LORENZ POTOČNIK, 2007¹

Our epigraph comes from the design of a new regional map for Jerusalem, a visionary idea produced by two Austrian architects built around a grounded historical reading of the cultural, environmental, economic, and political history of the city. The design's underlying premise was that Jerusalem could be considered just one of many Middle East cities with a similarly contested and multicultural past, making it mundane as well as exceptional, and thus inspiring efforts to locate the roots of the city's potential transformation in a shared history that could serve as the basis for new regional connections in the future. The logic of the project is also built on shared environmental and demographic characteristics of the region as well as the vast number of cities and towns to which it is home, and the strikingly short distances between them, that characterize

¹ For further information, see <<http://envisioningpeace.org/visions/hummus>>

the proximities of the principal urban agglomerations along an extended Eastern Mediterranean Sea belt. The project therefore aimed at the ecological, social, economic, and historical integration of Jerusalem into a much larger and interlinked city-region that would include countries ranging from Egypt, Israel, and Jordan but also including Cyprus and up through southern Turkey as well. As imagined by the project, these different locations would keep their unique historical attributes, cultures, and identities, many of them reflected in the built environment of their key cities, but together they would also comprise a diverse and newly imagined whole, both tangible and imaginary, that ideally might serve to tie their fates to each other in constructively positive ways. Aspiring to a notion of solidarity, all urban areas in the East Mediterranean Sea belt, of which Jerusalem would be but one, hypothetically could use their specific strengths to help each other develop both individually and collectively in order to promote and cultivate peace (cf. Figures 32, 33 and 34).

Sigi Atteneder and Lorenz Potocnik's visionary proposal – not entirely utopian but not entirely pragmatic either – was one of four premiated schemes among many entries submitted to a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)-generated ideas competition that solicited innovative visions for a just, peaceful and sustainable Jerusalem by the year 2050.² Titled *Just Jerusalem*, to signal the search for justice and to highlight the importance of focusing (solely) on the city rather than on competing nations, the global competition was launched (via the web) in March 2007 and closed in January 2008. A key point of departure for this experiment in visioning was the concept of “the right to the city” elaborated on by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal writings on the theme, which have great resonance for those living in divided or conflict cities like Jerusalem, where mobility and

2 In the interests of full disclosure, the co-authors of this chapter were involved in the crafting, organization, and implementation of this project and the global competition. Some of the assessments of the project's aims come from personal knowledge, although much of the information is documented on the Jerusalem 2050 website: <<http://www.envisioningpeace.org>>. For more elaboration on the project, and for closer examination of the entries to the competition (discussed in greater detail by entry number in the paper's final section), please visit the website.

access to everyday activities and the urban built environment are hindered or strongly curtailed. In his philosophical writings, Lefebvre conceived of the city as gathering the interests of the whole society as much as of those who physically inhabit it. He also saw social relations and society – not the state or nation – as the conceptual reference point for a city's humanitarian promise. Moreover, for Lefebvre, those “inhabitants” who are to be guaranteed rights to the city are not necessarily bounded in space or in the formal territorial confines of the city proper. Indeed, arbitrary territorial boundaries coercively imposed by national or other state authorities would be antithetical to and violate Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city if they also restricted the flows by limiting “place(s) of encounter”: the natural spaces of sociability in and surrounding formally-drawn city borders, or by emphasizing the exchange value of spaces within the city rather than the “priority of use value” (Lefebvre, “Right” 158). In this sense, Lefebvre was as concerned with the right to cosmopolitan urban life as with the right to the physical city itself, a presupposition that inexorably locates the notion of urbanism at the center of any emancipatory political vision of a new society.

To bring Lefebvre's utopian ideas to life means to re-imagine both cities and urbanism in such a way as to further the humanitarian and democratic potential of both. These were precisely the aims of the *Just Jerusalem Competition*, which sought to transcend the pragmatic and utopian conceptions of place that have for so long limited socially just planning/architectural theory and action (whether in Jerusalem, other conflict cities, or elsewhere), and to focus instead on “visioning” as a practice that straddles conventional divides between the ostensibly possible and supposedly impossible in design and architectural or planning practice. Arguably, these aims were also clearly embodied in the prize-winning *East Mediterranean City Belt* entry, which elaborates on a vision for a new city-region that holds out the potential to transcend the politically debilitating constraints of nationalism that have kept Jerusalem divided, while also promoting territorial fragmentation and political conflict in the region. The visionary ideas developed in the *East Mediterranean City Belt* project not only owe their power to the authors' efforts to steep the scheme in the city's historical past and possible future, or to the authors' imaginative praxis that allowed them to take a

critical stance towards nationalism and territorial boundaries, or even to their bold decision not to accept the self-limiting constraints that have characterized most urban design in or for Jerusalem; rather, the greatest contribution of the plan is in fact the willingness it demonstrates to offer a possible future without first requiring an identifiable client waiting in the wings to build it.

If there is one limitation to utopian thinking in architecture and urban design that suggests its inevitable failure, it is not merely that context is frequently missing, a point already made by the editor of this volume, Nathaniel Coleman. A more fundamental limitation and challenge to any hope of success is the lack of a specific client, or builder, for most utopian visions. It is this latter constraint as much as the former that encourages ideas for “nowhere” that unavoidably fail to address the context and realities of a place and thus also all but guarantee that they will never get built “somewhere.” However, the authors of the East Mediterranean City Belt made a virtue of the absence of a standard client in the Just Jerusalem Competition, capitalizing on the open invitation to constructive imagination presented by the competition. They also took the competition organizers’ willingness to let design entrants “define their own Jerusalem” in social, spatial, and symbolic terms as an inducement to think outside the conventional design or planning mindset. Both atypical conditions made it possible to think about the city in both utopian and practical terms – as both “nowhere” and “somewhere” – leading the designers to offer an idea that was relevant to both Jerusalem and nearly everywhere else in the region, further transcending the apparent “nowhere-somewhere” divide that conventionally bedevils utopian thinking, and even more so its practice. All of this suggests that it may be the absence of a client, and even a well-defined physical location for design, that brings out the most that utopian thinking and imaginative visioning can offer, a realization already suggested by Thomas More in the exotic island setting of *Utopia*.

With the above in mind, in this chapter we assess the real potential of utopian ideals and visionary practices in urban design, particularly in terms of their relevance for conflict cities. To accomplish this we will examine the epistemological aims and outcomes of the Just Jerusalem Competition in light of architectural and planning history and theory. Beginning with an assessment of how this imaginative design experiment differed

from traditional urban design and planning practices, both pragmatic and utopian, we will then consider whether this actually made a difference to the ways place is conventionally envisaged. More specifically, the chapter proceeds as follows: the first two sections discuss utopianism and pragmatism in theory and practice so as to situate the Jerusalem 2050 project and its “visioning” methodology in a path-dependent context of urban architectural/planning theory. The third section develops the concept of visioning and discusses how it straddles the traditions of both planning and architectural theory, not just in light of planning history but also relative to the Just Jerusalem Competition specifications. The penultimate section presents an overview of the entries to the competition and evaluates the extent to which they suggest imaginative ideas for rethinking Jerusalem. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on visioning as a new method of design practice for working within conflict cities.

From the Utopian to the Pragmatic: Situating Visioning in the Tradition of Architecture and Planning

The last few decades have brought massive political, economic, and social change to urban areas. Trends such as population growth, the rise of dual economies and oppressive political regimes, and continued transnational migration have accelerated urbanization and caused urban resources and territories to become increasingly contested. The nature of these conditions, far more symptomatic of economic, social, and political forces than environmental design, raises the question as to whether or not architecture and planning have the capacity to effectively respond to these changes. Intriguingly, just when the range of problems confronting the development of cities seems insurmountable, utopian vision has all but vanished from practitioners in our most urbanized, conflicted epoch, prompting the question, how is this possible? Given the potential Utopia harbors for the imaginary reconstitution of society and its settings, how can we justify distancing ourselves from utopian discourse at a time when urban resources and territories are becoming increasingly contested?

Utopian ideals have not always been relegated to the sidelines in planning and architectural practice. Creating future visions for cities was once a standard element of planning theory and practice. From Plato's ideal republics to Aristotle's ideals to more recent utopian visions in western architecture and planning (i.e., those of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Lewis Mumford, Le Corbusier, and Paul Goodman, to name just a few), visioning, defined as the task of creating new physical, discursive, or experimental renderings of a desired state of affairs, has persisted. Creative visions have not only influenced the form and character of contemporary cities, the new concepts of urbanism their inventors developed received considerable attention because of the potential these schemes held out to improve the welfare of individuals and communities through architecture and engineering. The combined influence of these innovators helped to create an urban planning approach combining rationality and physical design tools for solving community problems with an array of visionary ideals undergirding these practices. The Garden City by Ebenezer Howard and *Ville Radieuse* by Le Corbusier are key theoretical examples of the apparently utopian projects that influenced twentieth-century architecture and urbanism, before falling into disrepute from the late 1950s onwards.³

The rise and demise of these visions should be seen in the context of ongoing tensions, established in the nineteenth-century, between pragmatism (the "is" as fact) and optimism (the "ought" as potential), fueling an intense debate that ended in the mid-to-late twentieth century with victory for those advocating pragmatism as the guiding approach for urban planning (Coleman 38). In part, the triumph of the pragmatists owed to unresolved disputes over the strengths and weaknesses of the original modernist utopian projects of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The harshest critics (Karl Popper and Colin Rowe amongst them)

3 On questioning the extent to which Howard, Wright, and Le Corbusier all projected Urban Utopias, see Fishman. For further reading on utopian visions in western architecture and planning, see Coleman and Fishman. For criticism of utopian visions in architecture and planning, see Tafuri; Rowe and Koetter.

argued that utopian ideals always required totalitarian coercion and physical determinism to be realized; while supporters saw utopian thinking as a crucial catalyst and pathway for any kind of incremental social change (Ernst Bloch and Henri Lefebvre, for example). Adding to the complexity of this debate in architecture and planning, the term Utopia has often been used to describe schemes characterized as being impossibly static physically, socially, and economically, completely lacking in any dynamism (Rowe and Koetter 9–31). Thus, after the initial excitement generated by Howard's and Le Corbusier's theories, their visions, despite never being realized in constructed reality, came to be heavily criticized as rigid spatial regimes of control and order (see Harvey, *Spaces*; Tafuri; Yiftachel, "Planning"). The demise of utopian thinking, then, was partly an unavoidable outcome of its own contradictory logic: if the ideal or promise of utopia was tantamount to commitment to dynamic processes of social change, more often than not, in achievement, Utopia re-produced the stultifying order and social control of existing conditions (only more intensively); inevitably, Utopia diminished the enthusiasm for its own enactment (Harvey, *Spaces* 173).

Due to the apparent internal contradiction within Utopia between initial promise and the likelihood of disappointing results, and the obvious material constraints on actually realizing Utopia in the twentieth century, planning and architecture have generally disassociated themselves from the sort of grand forward thinking allied with utopianism. Leading thinkers, Jane Jacobs in particular, went so far as to insist that urbanists should no longer try, as Howard, Wright, and Le Corbusier did, to actively define the central goals of society and present a unified plan for attaining them (Fishman 269). By helping erode confidence in the search for a common good or purpose as the basis for city life, such postures further debilitated the commitment to utopian thought (Fishman 267).

In architecture, the postmodern opposition to utopian projects became particularly evident in the late 1960s and 1970s, through efforts to celebrate the consumer society as well as the "here and now," and in what was named by the architect Philip Johnson as "functional eclecticism" (a fanciful use of historical elements determined by pleasure alone). More recently the work of, Rem Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, Hani Rashid, and Lise Anne Couture are good examples of a "post-critical" posture, dominated by a pragmatic

approach that emphasizes materiality and technology while also turning cities into spectacles by celebrating the global economy, avoiding political agendas, and developing technological devices rather than responding to urgent issues of urbanization or larger social justice ideals (Frazer 320). This combination of elements, which sustains an emergent anti-utopian acceptance of things as they are by encouraging opportunism, is particularly promoted by Rem Koolhaas, who has become "a global favorite of the intelligentsia and students alike" (Coleman 84). Yet when coupled with development of a critical discourse on knowledge, power and truth, the embrace of anti-utopianism has led to a disjuncture between lived experience and imagined space, accentuating what Bernard Tschumi called "the architectural paradox," and further explaining why architecture so frequently disregards the existing reality while also attempting to create an alternative (see Foucault; Stuart Hall; Tschumi; Lefebvre, *Everyday*).

In planning, the disassociation from utopianism has been no less extreme, although the path has been different. The failures associated with Robert Moses-style big plans that trampled with abandon over neighborhoods and residents led to a reductive anti-utopianism position that identified Utopia with absolutism or totalizing projects (Caro). The shift began with the heavy critique of comprehensive and master planning, leading to ongoing tensions between advocates for "planning from above" and "planning from below," with the latter calling for more conscientious efforts to reduce the scope and scale of planning as well as the number of main actors involved (Jacobs, *Death*). The relative global success of the "planning from below" approach resulted from new relationships forged between public sector planners and civil society groups, many of whom relied on non-government organizations as partners in the construction of alternative planning projects and processes. In many urban settings, civil society advocates sought to produce alternative projects that could challenge free market developments associated with master planning. These bottom-up planning practices not only emerged in welfare states of the advanced capitalist world, but also in poorer countries of the developing world where limited prosperity made it relatively easier for governments to offer participatory mechanisms to citizens than to actually build better cities. One exception to this trend is currently seen in resource-heavy regions

of the developing world where massive mega-project developments requiring top-down coordination are built in the service of macro-economic development goals (as in the cases of China and Dubai, for example). But as a recognized approach in most contemporary democracies, with powerful advocates in key multilateral institutions like the World Bank, participatory planning is now practiced world-wide.

Whatever its origins, as Bish Sanyal has recently argued, the reliance on planning from below has had an inadvertent side effect – in the form of a lack of attention to public-sector planning and institutional mechanisms that are essential to any social development and change (Sanyal, "Planning"). Furthermore, strategies of "planning from below" have shifted professional focus from the object itself, the city, to action-oriented participatory approaches such as advocacy and communicative planning, both of which tend to focus on much smaller geographic constituencies.⁴ Proponents of these strategies – which map and act upon the claims of groups defined in relatively circumscribed terms – accept the current distribution of resources and operate within an existing order. Thus, even if they help foster inclusive negotiation and well-crafted advocacy, the trade-offs come in the limited geographic scope of action. Inclusive negotiation and advocacy work well at smaller scales, where homogeneity is more likely and claims are tied to manageable constituencies. However, such methods are less efficacious at larger scales where heterogeneity predominates and urban claims multiply, which by their very nature make "planning from below" ill suited for producing macro visions of social justice in cities.

Finally, the involvement of citizens in the planning process – with its supposed emphasis on individual and competing voices and visions – paradoxically all but finalized the shift toward expediency in planning, predictably leading also to the further discrediting of utopian ideals, which are seen as paralytic, rather than action oriented by mainstream planning thinkers (Healey, "Pragmatic"). If until the 1970s the citizen could be considered

4 The turn to direct participation at the local scale began with Davidoff and still persists as a key element in planning practice; see Forester; Healy, *Collaborative*; Huxley and Yiftachel; Innes.

a relatively passive actor, for whom plans were being produced, in recent decades the citizen as subject has been born. Citizens have not only become increasingly visible consumers of professional services, in some cases, they have also become active participants in the planning process. The apparent democratization of planning by way of inclusiveness and participation has, at least superficially, challenged prevailing planning paradigms, in which states have traditionally been more likely than citizens to create the general conditions driving market forces and private sector activities. Up until very recently, responsibility for identifying and defining new planning principles, like zoning, urban circulation policies, the physical distribution of housing, and the structure of cities would have resided with the state rather than its citizens.

Much of the shift toward citizen involvement can be traced to the 1970s, when the divergent social characteristics of cities became ever more visible, particularly with respect to the poor and disadvantaged who faced increased poverty and unemployment, and as a consequence frequently turned to protest and mobilization (Lipton; Lupton). In response, planners sought new methods for targeting poverty and other pressing concerns by addressing both the physical and social needs of urban residents in ways that might improve their productivity, income, and welfare. During this period, urban programs went beyond housing and other physical needs in cities to address broader social questions such as safety, gender, experience, and cognition, to name but a few (see Jacobs, *Death*; Hayden; Calthorpe; Lynch). And even if these expanded social concerns were not fully taken up by planners in a convincing way, because many of these new programs focused on the human scale, they reinforced a preoccupation with human agency and subjective interpretation in the design of cities, a trend which paralleled the developing concern among urban designers and urban planners with citizen input.

The spreading popularity of participatory planning, combined with the more circumscribed focus on ever smaller scales, added a further layer of skepticism about physical planning in general and master planning in particular, and in turn, about large-scale solutions to fundamental urban problems (although never so much as to put an end to them). To the extent that cities were now being perceived as fragmented – a complicated collection

of spaces, individuals, and identities sharing little beyond the immediate cognitive terrain of the quotidian – these developments in planning theory led to considerable criticism of planning strategies that addressed the city as a whole, or the “general public interest” as a totality. In its stead, critical thinking became ever more central to planning education, even leading to questions about the need for problem solving, and once liberated from the preoccupation with problem-solving, planners turned to the fields of geography, economics, and sociology for clues to some way forward, a tendency which helped to conclusively sever the long-established link between architecture and physical planning (Sanyal, “Critical”; P. Hall). Although inspired by laudable theoretical developments, planning’s move away from imagining how to shape the city or physical interventions in it quickly transformed into a preoccupation with policy and management. Perhaps unintentionally, all of these shifts in the scope and scale of planning and architectural practice have been further entrenched by the neoliberal economy and the decentralization of urban planning, which has effectively dismantled much of the planning authority of the state, giving more power to local government but mostly to private developers.⁵

The Possibilities and Limitations of Transformative Intent in Contemporary Architecture Planning Practice

The preceding historical narrative paints a relatively depressing picture of what has become of utopian visions and concerns for transformative large-scale urban change in the planning profession. This is not to say that desires to eliminate structural problems of inequality and injustice, or efforts to insure rights to the city, have completely disappeared. Indeed, the positive side of the picture painted above is that much of contemporary neoliberal

⁵ For more on the impact of markets on the state’s planning capacity, see Harvey, *Neoliberalism and Capital*; Marcuse and Van Kempen, *Globalizing and States*.