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Narrating Pasts and Futures in Jerusalem's Visual Signs

Dana Herbergs
August 17, 2014
Washington, DC

Research Paper 12
August 2014





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4137 Susquehanna Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742 U.S.A.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes representations of Jerusalem—its history, neighborhoods and communities—found in street signs and plaques in the urban landscape. Narratives of place are always politically inflected. The contemporary visual and textual portrayals of Jerusalem considered here index core issues that are linked to transformative periods in Israel's history: the 1948 War, Mizrahi immigration and inter-ethnic struggle, and the recent rise of ethno-nationalism buttressed by forces of globalization. Considered together, the selected inscriptions reveal a tension between justifying and undermining Israeli claims to Jerusalem and by extension, upholding and critiquing hierarchies in Israeli society.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dana Hercbergs is a folklorist specializing in the intersection of personal narrative, urban history and national memory. Her research focuses on Arab and Jewish encounters and identities in Palestine/Israel particularly in Jerusalem, and on mobilities associated with tourism and travel. She is writing a book on Jerusalem's social history based on oral narratives, tourism and architecture.

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Introduction

As the nexus of state, local and transnational forces, the city is a site of everyday practices of hegemony as well as of resistance. Situated at the center of an ethno-national conflict, Jerusalem is a site of intense identity claims, which find expression in a variety of aural and visual narratives ranging from the hegemonic to the subversive, from the spectacular to the mundane. In many ways, Jerusalem is a text that is constantly being re-written. In attending to the ways that power relations find expression in Jerusalem's urban landscape, scholars have noted the interplay of narratives and counter-narratives in tourism (Brin 2006, Brin and Noy 2011), street signs and plaques (Suleiman 2004), architecture and archeology (Abu el-Haj 2001; Pirovansky 2012; Greenberg 2009), and postcards and billboards (Semmerling 2004; Hercbergs and Noy 2013). These historical and semiotic readings of the built environment reveal that quotidian spaces in Jerusalem are enmeshed in a constant struggle of assertion, negotiation and justification.

This paper offers a close reading of street plaques and signs in Jerusalem as a way of accessing the issues that animate the contemporary landscape and impact residents' sense of place. As scholars have shown, the battle over representation is central to today's political struggles between Israel and the Palestinians, and the urban landscape is a stage for such representations. Yet the dynamics of *that* battle over Jerusalem have obscured others— for instance intra-Jewish claims of cultural legitimacy and urban belonging. Such claims have been on the rise for the past three decades, as Jewish Israelis have engaged in a process of revisiting formerly suppressed communal history and ethnic culture (e.g. language, music, and folk customs) and finding ways to assert their contribution and belonging to the city.

Broadly, the cultivation of Jewish ethnic and cultural expressions signals a 'turning inward' in Israel following the demise of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s and especially since the second intifada of 2000, which precipitated the breakdown of negotiations with the Palestinians. Accompanying these separationist trends, instances of cultural revival have been especially noticeable in Jerusalem. Photo archives and oral history projects¹ (Dabach 2014) dedicated to neighborhoods and communities are among the initiatives, as are neighborhood tours, storytelling events (Hercbergs, forthcoming) and new street plaques (Shalev-Khalifa and Avi-Dan 2005). While seemingly quaint or localized, these recent cultural efforts are intimately linked with the wider struggle for dominance over the city; as we shall see, some complement current power regimes while others voice critiques and offer alternatives.

In what follows, I present a selection of street signs and plaques in the urban landscape of West Jerusalem, and offer a semiotic reading of the images and narratives they present. In doing so, I follow a tradition of semiotics established by Barthes (1964, 1977) with an emphasis on the meanings that signs convey in public urban spaces, where they form a part of everyday walking paths of strollers, errand-runners, construction workers and others. In addition, signs supply resources for deliberate paths— for instance as selected by tour guides, whereby they act as stopping points for learning about local history and heritage, and where people can have their photos taken—as well as for focus groups to validate the accounts they bear. De Certeau speaks of the performativity of the urban walker who composes a "rhetoric of walking" that "affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'" (1984: 99). In other words, as a spatial practice, walking takes places in and interfaces with spaces that are produced. I am here interested in what De Certeau refers to as the "apparatuses that

¹ See for example, the Musrara Collection at the [The Naggar school of Photography in Musrara](#) and [New Spirit](#).

produce a disciplinary space” (ibid: 96). As actual things people see, eye-level signs form part of the embodied aspect of the streets of Jerusalem, where they (re)shape historical narratives and understandings of place.

Proceeding chronologically, I analyze four kinds of signs: (1) *Commemorations of state power* in the form of plaques narrating Israel’s victory in the 1948 War, situated in residential locations where key battles took place; (2) *Commemorations of Jewish communal heritage* in a permanent exhibit of old photographs mounted in the city center since 2002; (3) *Counter-hegemonic inscriptions* commemorating the Black Panthers via street names and symbols mounted by artist-activists in the border neighborhood of Musrara in 2011; and finally, (4) Diffuse images of *ethno-nationalism and globalization* in the form of the ‘Tower of David,’ which since the mid-2000s has become a logo for the city and appears ubiquitously in the city.

These signs present varying combinations of textual narrative, symbols and photographic images. I analyze them on the basis of the following elements: The sign’s formal features, its location in the urban landscape, the time period in which it appeared, and its addressed (and unaddressed) audiences. In the final section, I discuss the thematic intersections of these signs and engage them in a ‘conversation’ with one another.

1. Commemorative Plaques of the 1948 War

While the presence and size of the Jewish community in Jerusalem has fluctuated throughout history, from the early twentieth century it was the Zionist movement that propelled the development of cultural and proto-state institutions in the new city (Bezalel art school, the Hebrew University), as well as the construction of new Jewish neighborhoods. Since declaring Jerusalem as its capital in 1948, the state of Israel has inscribed its power in the landscape of the western city primarily through place-names and street signs. While others have addressed Israeli signs and architectural projects in East Jerusalem after 1967 (Suleiman 2004; Nitzan-Shiftan 2004; Abu el-Haj 2001), I am interested here in the traditionally Arab neighborhoods of West Jerusalem that were populated by Jews very soon after the 1948 War.

According to Appadurai, place-names act in tandem with physical acts of construction and demolition as “conscious identity-producing activities of nation-states.” Together they produce an *ethnoscape*; a locality that delegitimizes traces of past presences (Appadurai 1996: 183). After Israel secured the areas west of the armistice line (the ‘Green Line’), the main attempt to erase the Arab character of the western and southern neighborhoods has been through the act of renaming. A notable instance thereof is the neighborhood of Qatamon, which played a crucial role in the fall of the area to Zionist forces in 1948 (Radai 2007), and which was renamed Gonenim— ‘defenders.’ During the British Mandate (1922-1948) the homes were marked by the family names of their owners—Beit Dajani, Beit Sakakini, etc.—while the streets of the neighborhood were mostly unnamed. After 1948, the neighborhood’s street names were set according to the subjects of the War of Independence, biblical figures, and Zionist personalities (Kroyanker 2002: 177-8).² Qatamon Street was renamed Rachel Imenu and its continuation Hezkiya ha Melech (both biblical figures), while Kovshei Qatamon (the Conquerors of Qatamon), HaPalmach and HaPortsim refer to Zionist fighting units and their entry into the neighborhood to break the siege that the Arab armies imposed on the Jews in Jerusalem on June 11, 1948.

In this context, the first set of signs we will look at consists of blue plaques affixed to the outer stone walls of various buildings (mostly residential) located in the historically Palestinian Arab neighborhoods

² Cohen and Kliot (1992) detail how assigned place-names in Israel more generally correspond to the ideology of the political party in power in various eras in the history of the Knesset.

of Qatamon, Talbiyeh and the Germany Colony among others. The blue plaques bear narratives in white text—the colors of the Israeli flag—in Hebrew atop English. They were placed by the Society for Preservation of Israel Heritage Sites (SPIHS), established in 1984 by the Knesset’s Education Committee. The Society’s aims center on the preservation and restoration of sites linked to primarily Jewish institutions and settlements in the country, and to raising public awareness about their value. Its website emphasizes sites that “express the achievements of prior cultures and technologies” and that are indicative of “intergenerational continuity and respect for the builders.”³

As a testament to an iconic structure that was not preserved, the SPIHS emblem is the Herzliya Gymnasia, a now-destroyed cultural institution in Tel Aviv; the signs themselves are likewise reminiscent of this shape. The emblem appears at the top right of the plaque, while the seal of the Jerusalem municipality is at the top left. While many SPIHS plaques are found in Jerusalem, those which commemorate 1948 battles bear an additional emblem in the center, corresponding to the particular Zionist fighting unit that was active in the particular location.

The question of whose heritage they commemorate is key: The texts and symbols imbue the plaques—and the buildings upon which they are fixed—with *national* significance, the narratives tying them to battles and to the Zionists’ victory in the area. The texts themselves were a product of testimonies from a number of former fighters who participated in the project, which began in 1999, and resumed in 2005, when they toured the area with the local SPIHS director.⁴ These narratives of battle contrast with the unique character of each building that bears the plaque. For instance, the opulent mansion that Anis Jamal built for his family in Talbiyeh in 1934 (Figure 1), still displays his initials AJ on its front iron door (Kroyanker 2002: 92).⁵ The stone fence that runs around the perimeter of the property bears a plaque that announces it as “Dror,” the headquarters of Lehi (a Zionist paramilitary unit).



Figure 1. Anis Jamal mansion in Talbiyeh with blue plaque by the front gate

³ <http://www.shimur.org/viewStaticPage.aspx?pageID=258> (last accessed 8 July 2014)

⁴ Phone conversation with Itzik Shweiki, SPIHS director of the Jerusalem District, 1 July 2014.

⁵ In the summer of 2008, white siding covered the front gate and sits atop the stone fence due to construction by a private entrepreneur, while the light box sign above the gate is a remnant of the building’s role as a club for immigrants (Kroyanker 2002: 93).

It reads in English:

‘Machane Dror’ acted as Lehi Headquarters, and housed their arms, ammunition and their explosives industry. This structure was named in memory of Mordechai Ben Uziyahu ‘Dror’, who fell during the liberation of Sheik-Badder. Here a tragic explosion claimed the lives of five of the finest Lehi freedom fighters.

The sign accomplishes a triple re-inscription: Beit Jamal is renamed Machane Dror, thereby re-functionalizing the residence as a military headquarters; the building is likewise given a new birth year, as it were, coinciding with the 1948 War; and lastly, it contextualizes the building within a cartography of battles, namely to Sheikh-Badder [sic]. Note the use of the term ‘liberation’ applied to the Arab village of Sheik Badr, today the site of Jerusalem’s largest public park (Gan Sacher). The Hebraized spelling of that village also re-inscribes it in a new language field of the victor. As Suleiman shows, the misspelling or mis-transliteration of Arabic street names into Hebrew points to negligence and even disrespect for the culture and identity of the conquered (2004: 187). Lastly, beside the omission of the house’s origins and cultural milieu, there is a historical omission: it is unclear whether the explosion was due to accident (the building is said to have been an explosives factory) or to battle. The Hebrew text is more complete, and lists the names of those who died. It is clear from the position of the Hebrew text and the details it contains that Hebrew-speaking Israelis, who are more personally familiar with the battles that took place here, constitute the primary addressee. The Arab character of the neighborhood is occasionally referred to, but there is no reference to its heritage.

When the plaques do reference the Arab neighborhoods, they do so briefly with a tone of justification for their take-over by Zionist forces, as in the following sign entitled ‘Bombing of Houses in Qatamon.’ It is affixed to a low wall along the front of the Museum for Islamic Art in Qatamon, and once again refers to Lehi forces blowing up abandoned Arab houses as a pre-emptive defense strategy, to prevent their use by Arab forces as bases for attacking the southern Jewish neighborhoods.



Figure 2. A commemorative plaque in the neighborhood of Qatamon entitled “Bombing of Houses in Qatamon”

Small errors in the English translation (the misspelled word ‘beginning,’ and a grammatical mistake –the final word ‘neighborhood’ should be plural), again signal the prioritization of Hebrew.⁶ Pragmatically, the characterization of houses as ‘abandoned’ is common in Israeli discourse; this terminology helped justify the take-over of Arab property by the Custodian of Absentee Property in 1948. Countering this notion are narratives of Palestinians fleeing under duress with the expectation of returning within a few short weeks, as found in the diary of notable Qatamon resident Khalil Sakakini, an Arab educator who fled to Egypt. His daughter Hala describes in her memoir *Jerusalem and I* her visit to the neighborhood in 1967. The section of the wall bearing the above plaque stands before a parking lot adjacent to the Museum for Islamic Art, indicating the absence of properties that were exploded. If we read between the lines we might imagine the unaddressed recipient, someone like Hala Sakakini, coming back and wondering what happened to them.

The SPIHS signs simultaneously justify presence and absence. The events they describe contrast with a native sense of taken-for-granted familiarity with, and belonging to, the place as found in the neighborhood map drawn from memory by Hala Sakakini. The absence of Arabic text likewise accomplishes an erasure; the language here constituting a taboo. I would argue that the SPIHS signs belie an early debate in the Israeli government and military about what to do with these properties and their contents, as well as a contemporary ambivalence about Palestinian houses now populated by Jewish Israelis. An indication of this tension are the ubiquitous Israeli flags that tend to adorn recognizably ‘Arab’ houses, especially opulent ones, in places like Talbiyeh, where Edward Said’s family lived.

2. A Picture in Stone—Commemorating Sephardi heritage in Central Jerusalem

Moving from the national narratives of Zionist fighters in West Jerusalem’s historically Arab neighborhoods, we now consider commemorations of communal Jewish heritage as another way of asserting belonging. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Heritage is a way of producing ‘hereness’” (1995:373). In storytelling about Jerusalem’s past, Sephardim in particular among Jerusalem natives appear as privileged ethnic subjects, having comprised the majority of the Jewish community in late Ottoman Palestine (Kark and Glass 1999:80). In 2002, their cultural status was cemented in a permanent photography exhibit of family portraits and street scenes mounted in the neighborhood of Ohel Moshe called *Temuna ba-Even*, ‘Photograph in Stone.’ The exhibit commemorates the 120th anniversary of the neighborhood’s founding by the notables of the Sephardi community in Jerusalem (Shalev-Khalifa and Avi-Dan 2005). The project is a joint initiative of the Weiner House Heritage Centre and Lev ha-Ir (‘Heart of the City’) Community Center, which invited the neighborhood’s residents to have their photographs scanned into the photo archive of the Yad Ben Zvi Institute. Most of the photographs are from the 1920s and 1930s during the British Mandate era, and each image is accompanied by a description written by the family that provided it (idem). The project has since expanded within Jerusalem’s central neighborhoods.

⁶ As a side note, while Qatamon is the accepted spelling, here it appears with a ‘K’ instead of ‘Q’, (the Arabic letter qaf corresponding to the Romanized letter Q).



Signs commemorating Ohel Moshe founders Malka Mizrahi (née Parnas) 1929 and the Valero Family 1906

In its first stage, ‘Photograph in Stone’ highlights the rootedness of the Sephardim, their pride as founders of Ohel Moshe, and the lifeways that developed there for generations. In the pre-WWI neighborhoods known as Nachlaot, this way of life took place around the central structures, such as the water cistern and courtyard, the synagogue, and public baking oven. In the last few decades, these facilities have fallen out of use, a fact that arouses nostalgia among residents of these historically Jewish quarters of West Jerusalem. The exhibit thereby indexes a lost world, constituting a discourse of authenticity that points to the longevity of Jewish communities in the Middle East (Shenhav 2006).

In this case, rootedness of the Sephardi communities in Jerusalem does not draw on the pioneering Sabra ethos of the European Zionists which sought to reinvent Jewish identity through arrival in and ‘conquest’ of the Land of Israel. Rather than enacting a moment of contact and conquest, as indexed by the blue plaques in Qatamon, these commemorative plaques evoke the communities’ sense of *being there*—as signified by the symbol of the stone.

The plaques include texts and explanations in Hebrew and English, but not in Arabic. This omission stands out even more than in the SPIHS signs because of the fact that Arabic was commonly spoken by the native Jewish population. Thus, on the one hand, ‘Photograph in Stone’ frames the neighborhood as one with an established Jewish past, whose Sephardi residents are local and native. Having preceded the state, they extend legitimacy to Israel’s claim to the city as part of an ongoing discursive struggle for rootedness. The exhibit thereby draws on the ‘primordialism thesis’ adopted by groups of Middle Eastern native Jews to assert their longevity and rootedness in the region, addressing both Hebrew-speakers and Anglophone tourists and recent apartment-buyers in Nachlaot. On the other hand, I interpret the absence of Arabic as a sign of the Sephardi community’s co-optation by the Zionist project (its Zionification, as it were), and an erasure of Arabic as a formal aspect of their heritage.

We might add a third, unaddressed recipient: It is no coincidence that the exhibit omits signage in Arabic, one of Israel’s official languages. Its omission presumes the Arabic-speaking public as irrelevant or hostile, and hence not worthy of address; in both cases the omission indicates that this is uncontestedly Jewish Israeli territory to which ‘Arabs’ have no claim.

As advanced by municipality and other local bodies, 'Photograph in Stone' exemplifies both a genuine testament to Sephardim and to the pre-state Jewish communities in the context of heritage production, as well as their cooptation to advance a general claim of Jewish rootedness in Jerusalem, which competes with the Palestinian claim of the same. It is consistent with the public commemoration of Jewish history in Jerusalem since the second intifada, parallel to the separatist *zeitgeist* that began in 2000.

3. Paths of Resistance: Commemorating Mizrahi Struggle in Musrara

Moving from central Jerusalem eastward, we arrive at Musrara, a neighborhood located on the "seam" of Arab and Jewish Jerusalem, where the complexities of a divided city—and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself—play out in the everyday lives of its residents. At the end of the 1948 War, Musrara was among the neighborhoods separated by an armistice zone known as the "No Man's Land." The western neighborhood's Palestinian residents fled during the course of the fighting. Some settled in East Musrara – then in Jordan, now across the highway named Road Number 1 – others in the Old City and beyond.

In the early 1950s, amid a country-wide housing shortage, Jews from North Africa began moving into these homes, with large families crowding into one or two rooms and sharing limited facilities. The movement of refugees and immigrants to and from the neighborhood generated stories that continue to resonate: Stories of Mizrahi Jews who found themselves living on the margins of the new state of Israel, excluded from the Zionist dream, and stories of Palestinians who looked westward at their homes across the border, hoping to one day return.

Israeli Musrara has come to be associated with the struggle of the country's Mizrahi Jews, namely through the Black Panther movement sparked by neighborhood youth in the early 1970s. The Panthers' demands for food, jobs and proper housing stemmed from their recognition that, as Arabized Jews in a European-oriented state, they bore the brunt of a world-wide pattern of domination. Following their meeting with Prime Minister Golda Meir (1969-1974), she infamously told a press conference that 'They are not nice'. While the Panthers eventually disintegrated, today they form part of a well-developed narrative of the neighborhood told in tours, exhibits, and other media, spearheaded by the local photography school and by other activists. Since the 1980s, west Musrara's revitalization has attracted locals and foreigners to commemorate the neighborhood's cultural heritage and its legacy of social activism. This activist ethos is inscribed into the stone structures that make up Musrara's built environment, with 'Black Panthers Way' and 'They're not Nice Alley' bearing Golda Meir's portrait.



Street signs mounted in Musrara by artist-activists commemorating the Black Panthers

The signs are part of the Black Panthers Tour created by the artist-activist group Muslala in 2011 to mark forty years since the group's emergence in the neighborhood. In contrast to the previous two sets of signs, the presence of Arabic script—in the middle of Hebrew and English—is notable. It ostensibly reflects Musrara's location on the border of East and West Jerusalem, as well as the fact that Arabic was the mother tongue of many of its North African immigrants. Both Arabic and English are translations, rather than transliterations, of the Hebrew. In addition to the above street signs is a series of square tiles painted with black fists (the symbol of the Black Panthers) placed in various places in the neighborhood.

Some of the Panthers, including those who no longer live in Musrara, were invited to place the tiles themselves. As Muslala co-founder and director Matan Israeli says, there is a parallel between the anonymity of the alleys that bear the tiles and the anonymity whence the Black Panthers emerged. He views the project as an act of reclamation:

“At the end of the day those who get streets named after them come from different positions in society; generals, politicians, prophets, writers, artists, rabbis, and not revolutionaries, especially not Mizrahim and certainly not the Black Panthers. So the idea was to make a clandestine act to mark the path, to make it a longer path than any other street in Musrara, so that it passes in all sorts of key areas in the story of the Panthers in the neighborhood.”

As markers of an alternative neighborhood history, the tiles form a basis for tours conducted by Muslala activists and others. Unlike the previous sets of plaques, there is no mention here of 'heritage'—a term associated with nostalgia; the tone is rather anti-establishment and tongue-in-cheek. At the same time, the commemoration of the Black Panthers in physical form serves to place their struggle—the arrests, clashes and the stigma that became attached to Musrara—in the past. While residents largely supported the project, many are wary of the kind of literal border crossings that Muslala activists (and some Black Panthers) invite, in part due to the sensitive issue of confiscated property—Jews are living in Palestinian homes, like the residents of Talbiyeh and Qatamon. The difference here is west Musrara's location across the highway from Arab East Jerusalem.

Here too, other voices emerge in the form of an emblematic inscription. Beside the sign reading “They're Not Nice” Alley is a spray-painted image of Prime Minister Menachem Begin (1977-1983), seen in several places around the summer of 2013. Begin is known for having coopted the Black Panthers' message and the Mizrahi struggle more generally to win the 1977 elections. Is Begin's image a counter-narrative? An expression of hawkish, anti-Arab sentiment across the highway from Arab East Jerusalem? At the very least it points to the tension between the radical politics of the Black Panthers and the right-wing views of Likud supporters in Musrara and beyond, and to 'unfinished business' of ethno-class parities created in the early days of the state.

4. Rebranding Jerusalem via the Tower of David: Signs of Ethno-nationalism and globalization

The final example is the most recent and most prevalent instance of signage in Jerusalem. This concerns the transformation of the so-called Tower of David as a symbol that has come to stand *for* the city itself, in a transformation that is linked to the demise of the peace process and to the re-branding of Jerusalem as an exclusively Jewish Israeli city. While the previous examples consisted of concrete signs, the Tower of David is a diffuse image; like the Eiffel Tower, it stands for the whole, yet is not copyrighted and thus lends itself to replication and stylization.

What is known today as the Tower of David is a seventeenth century minaret located in the Citadel inside the Old City beside Jaffa Gate, the western-facing entrance. For centuries, the Tower was part of a

repertoire of symbols of Jerusalem that in recent years have included the Western Wall and the Knesset. Since Israel's annexation of the Old City in 1967, the Muslim structure of the Dome of the Rock and the adjacent Jewish holy site of the Western Wall have functioned as the primary (dual) image of Jerusalem. Yet as of the second intifada, the Tower has displaced these to become the singular symbol of Israeli Jerusalem.

The 'rise' of the Tower of David represents two interrelated processes occurring since the 1990s: Jerusalem's increasing appeal to foreign investment, and the simultaneous transition from a secular to a religious and nationalist agenda in the municipality. Israel's pursuit of neo-liberal restructuring has accelerated in the post-Oslo era with the disintegration of the peace process between Israel and Palestine. As part of Israel's concurrent integration into the global economic system, it has promoted projects directed towards wealthy, ideologically-motivated diaspora Jews, and Israeli and foreign visitors to the city.

Two instances of the multiplication of the tower in the cityscape are 1) The appearance of actual sites that bear the name David and 2) *images of* the Tower of David commonly found in public places (municipal sites and real estate advertisements).

The Mamilla area near the Green Line (adjacent to the actual tower) is the location of several high profile projects, whereby David's Tower is becoming a sign not only of religious nationalism but also of luxury. This can be seen in new building projects built along the Green Line and beyond. The King David Residence, David's Citadel Hotel, and Mamilla Kfar David, all on King David Street, draw on the cultural capital of the extremely well-known and upscale King David Hotel, built in the 1920s and situated nearby on King David Street. An additional Davidian site is located on the other side of the Old City: the City of David archaeological park.

The latter is Israel's only national park to be run by a private organization. In this case the settler organization El'ad (acronym of *el ir David*, to the city of David) manages the site in occupied East Jerusalem. The entrance to the site is in the shape of a harp, associated with the young King David. The City of David national park comprises the core of Jerusalem's transformation by right-wing ideologies, here in attempting to prove the presence of the biblical king David through archaeological excavations in the dense Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan. In the process, El'ad is transforming it into a Jewish enclave and tourist center outside the Dung Gate, which leads to the Western Wall. The most visited tourist site by Israelis, the City of David park attempts to instantiate through excavations an underground Jewish Jerusalem.

On the other side of the Green Line, this vision can be seen in new building projects. The King David Residence (KDR) merges a Jewish ethnoscape with globalized luxury. It is located on King David Street, a five-minute walk from both downtown West Jerusalem and the Old City's Jaffa Gate, via the high-end Alrov Mamilla mall. The complex combines high-end living with related amenities, including three buildings with 88 luxurious apartments, commercial areas, and a Moroccan culture museum. The KDR icon is in the shape of a harp, suggesting a David-related visual image which complements the complex's name. Indicative of globalization and convenience, the KDR exists in a topological conversation with high-end shopping and hotels located across the street on the Green Line. Crucially, the languages used on the project's website were originally only French and English (but not Hebrew, which was added later), indicating the recent francophone and North American Jewish diaspora communities that are buying properties in Jerusalem.



Davidian images: King David Residence billboard ad, Lev ha-Ir construction site ad, and municipal street poster

A third example is an ad on a construction site for a neighborhood in Givat Mordechai called Lev Ha’Ir (Heart of the City) contains a logo for the project—a heart containing the Shrine of the Book (location of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and the Tower of David. Interestingly, although the project is located away from the Tower and the luxury triangle discussed above, and is geared to Israeli rather than foreign buyers, it nevertheless corresponds to the ‘heart’ of Jerusalem.

Lastly, an example of a counter-inscription is found on a poster glued to an electrical box, a common element in the urban topography of Jerusalem. The poster presents the image of the Tower in the Old City walls, with the upper third showing blue sky (connoting Israel’s national blue-and-white flag). Graffiti on the poster reads (in Hebrew), “Outside Israeli territory,” with an arrow pointing directly to the Tower of David. The inscription suggests that the top-down strategy of flooding the urban topography with ideologically-laden images does not escape local activists, nor does the fact that the Tower is a political and hence problematic icon.

Final Remarks: Intersecting Narratives

This paper has engaged in a critical reading of a few elements in the urban landscape of West Jerusalem to reveal power dynamics inherent in public acts of inscription—here in the shape of street plaques and signs. The images discussed here point to intersections of local, national and international actors and audiences that shape the city, ranging from government agencies to local activists, to nebulous flows of tourism and currency. As actual, situated, semiotic resources, these signs play into interactions and mobility of former military fighters, low-income neighborhood residents, and affluent consumers within Jerusalem. Each of these groups occupy particular social locations in Israeli society and are situated in polarities—Israeli vs. Palestinian; majority vs. minority ethno-class groups; ‘native’ vs. international, and more. Further, each case study reveals the presence of narratives and counter-narratives corresponding to major historical processes as they manifest themselves in Jerusalem.

The intertwined issues resulting from the 1948 War—of Palestinian refugees and property—are prominent subtexts in Qatamon and Musrara, where they continue to destabilize a taken-for-granted sense of belonging. In these neighborhoods we find different, even oppositional, approaches to commemoration: institutional memory of Zionist military victory in Qatamon versus anti-establishment activism in Musrara.

The Black Panthers conceptual tour is further situated in opposition to the ‘Photograph in Stone’ exhibit, both of which commemorate Israel’s ‘ethnic’ minorities. The product of local organizations, the latter

celebrates Sephardi heritage by incorporating native voices into an institutional message of ‘hereness’ that is a complement to the SPHIS plaques. On the other hand, Mizrahim do not use the term ‘heritage’ as do the former two; in Musrara the proud legacy of Mizrahi struggle takes the form of an anti-establishment counter-inscription, or an ‘anti-tour’ that plays on the anonymity of the Mizrahim versus figures such as Golda Meir.

Lastly, the diffuse Tower of David symbols and signs comprise a recent phase whereby right-wing ideologies and neo-liberal economic policies combine to create a landscape of high-end residential and commercial projects geared to wealthy transnational Jewish consumers. Ironically, this image transcends locality into the realms of hyper-reality while actual battles over representation, belonging, and territory are being waged (via excavation and displacement) on and beneath the ground.

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