

In Divided Jerusalem, Unification Starts From the Bottom Up

A close look at Jerusalem shows it's managed like two cities. But in parks, shopping malls and workplaces, Jews and Arabs are literally finding common ground

By [Nir Hasson](#)

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In the mind of every Jerusalemite, whether he lives in the western part of the city or the eastern, there is a mental map of the city, in which it is divided into areas where he feels safe and others in which he feels alien. These maps are a result of the political divide, but also of deliberate policies.

The “Jerusalem 2000” master plan – which reflects the ongoing policy for the city’s management that has been in place since 1967, under which each population group lives and receives services separately – may never have been fully approved, but it is considered the capital’s most comprehensive statement of policy since its reunification 51 years ago.

The plan’s general assumption is that there are three societies that must live, and receive and consume services separately – Palestinians, the ultra-Orthodox and the “general” population comprising the secular and national-religious Jewish populations. A close look at the city shows that it is indeed managed as if it’s two or three separate cities, a model whose parallel it is hard to find anywhere else in the world.



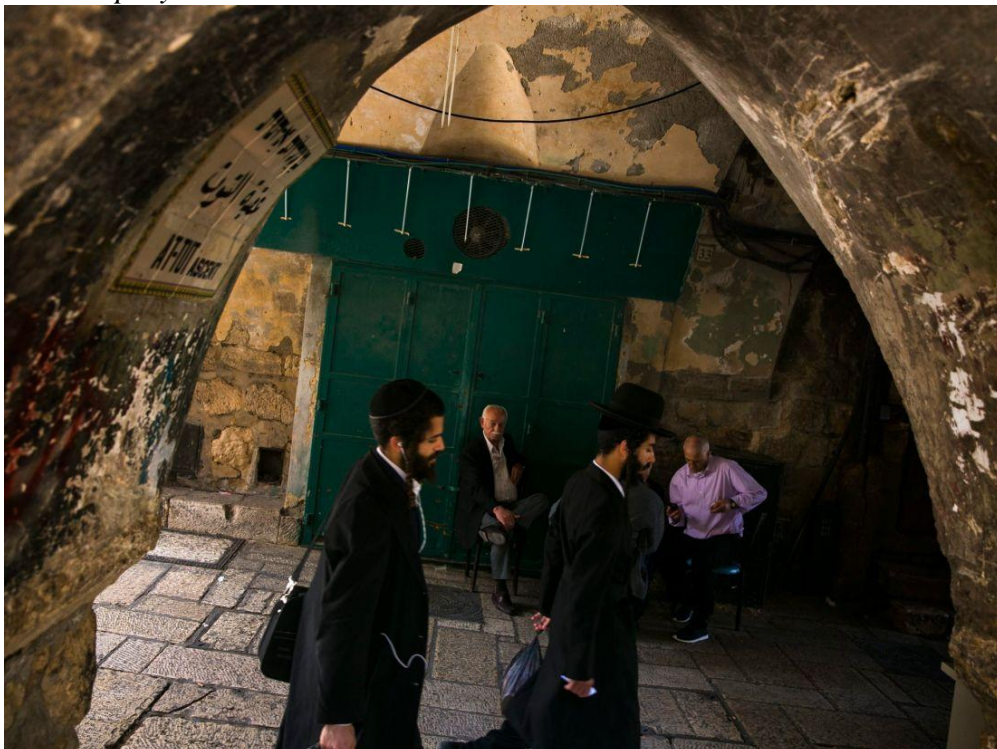
Arab women and children playing soccer in Jerusalem's Sacher Park. Emil salman

One must, nonetheless, distinguish between management and conduct. Ever since the separation barrier was erected, cutting [East Jerusalem](#) off from the [West Bank](#), the ties between the two sections of the city and the venues in which Israelis and Palestinians encounter each other have multiplied. These include parks, shopping malls and workplaces.

Now, there are those claiming that the divisions in Jerusalem are a thing of the past and that the authorities and planners should recognize this – and act deliberately to develop the capital’s shared spaces, as part of a goal to make it a better and more egalitarian city. At the same time, there are also those who believe that if these processes intensify, they will only exacerbate the political problem known as Jerusalem.



Muslims pray at Jerusalem's Sacher Park. Emil salman



The old city in Jerusalem. Jewish managers and employees often demonstrate solidarity with Palestinian workers. Olivier Fitoussi

The mosaic method

Despite the long-held view that Jerusalem is better off being run as a city of districts in which every population has its own neighborhoods, public spaces and facilities, the reality for many years was different. “From the end of the 19th century until 1945 or even 1948, Jerusalem was a mixed and cosmopolitan city, not like today’s London and New York, but like Cairo or Beirut of that time,” says Prof. Menachem Klein of Bar-Ilan University, author of the book “Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron,” about the history of the links between the different communities in those cities.

But for Jerusalemites today, this separation is taken for granted. There are two completely separate public transport systems in the city, with two central bus stations; there are two large commercial districts – the triangle formed by Jaffa-King George-Ben Yehuda streets in West Jerusalem, and the Saladin and Sultan Suleiman streets in the east.

Children study in four completely separate educational systems; the city is served by two different electric companies, and even the sewage is treated separately – with that from Palestinian neighborhoods flowing mostly undisturbed into the Kidron Valley, while the sewage of the Jewish neighborhoods flows to the purification plant at Nahal Sorek.

But within this clear separation, islands of connection have emerged over the past decade. The light rail has for the first time broken the absolute disconnect between the public transport networks; the Mamilla and Malha shopping malls are frequented by both Jews and Arabs; public spaces like Sacher Park and Liberty Bell Garden have become recreational areas for both populations, and the “Hand in Hand” bilingual school is thriving.



Arab women at Mamilla mall, in Jerusalem. Emil salman



Inside the Malha mall in Jerusalem. Frequented by both Jews and Arabs. Emil Salman

The city's large hospitals were always islands of sanity, but this feeling has been reinforced with the appointment of many Palestinian doctors to senior positions. Although the phenomenon of joint Jewish-Arab residential areas is still marginal, it is growing, and here and there you'll even find mixed Jewish-Arab couples.

What is common to most of these developments is that they sprung up from below, without guidance – and sometimes even in opposition to the authorities' plans.

“Today Jerusalem is perhaps the only city in the world that talks about separation; all around the world we talk about integration and common spaces,” says Marik Stern, a doctoral student in the department of politics and government at Ben-Gurion University and a researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Studies who studies the city's common spaces. “When we talk about separation under conditions of inequality, it clearly deepens the gaps. Separation is no longer valid today; it cannot be contained demographically anymore, whether from the ultra-Orthodox side or the Arab side.”

Experts agree that the turning point was the construction of the separation barrier, which cut off East Jerusalem from its economic and social centers in the West Bank and forced the city's Palestinian residents to look westward. Added to the barrier is the despairing sense that there will never be a political solution to the conflict and the weakness of the Palestinian Authority. All these pushed the Palestinians in Jerusalem toward the Israelization of their daily lives; they began to work more in West Jerusalem, to learn more Hebrew and to demand what was coming to them the municipality and other authorities.

The last connections are about to unravel

The integration of the two populations is most clearly felt in the workplace. True, in the first 20 years following the city's unification, up until the first intifada, tens of thousands of Palestinian workers (from both Jerusalem and the territories) were employed in Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem, but Stern points out some differences between now and that period.

“Then we were talking only about blue-collar workers – construction, industry, and hotels. Today we see a change in the status of Palestinian workers,” he says. “While the largest mass of workers is still a cheap and temporary labor force that works at minimum wage, there is a growing group of people working at higher-salaried and status jobs; in many cases they work at the same levels as Jewish workers.”



Simulation of the renewed Zion Square in Jerusalem. Totem - Design Studio

According to Stern, the interaction between Israelis and Palestinians at work constitutes the most significant encounter between the two societies in the city.

“During periods of tension, these are the last connections to unravel and the first to reconnect,” he explains. “When the ‘intifada of the knives’ broke out [in 2015], and roadblocks were set up, it was the employers who exerted pressure to allow their workers to enter.”

Today, Jerusalem's economy is completely dependent on Palestinian workers. Without them, many fields would be paralyzed, including public transportation, tourism and restaurants. “This interdependence largely holds East and West Jerusalem together,” says Stern. “This is also what prevented a wider outbreak of violence.”

In the study conducted by Stern together with Ahmad Asmar, and published by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research about a year ago, they examined this relationship. “We discovered that the encounters have a positive potential for

changing viewpoints and on the margins also promoted social relations after work hours,” says Stern.

Another encouraging finding is that during times of tension, Jewish managers and the employees demonstrated solidarity with the Palestinian workers: “Sometimes it was actual physical solidarity, when the managers closed the stores and stood at the entrance, and prevented the activists from the far-right Lehava organization to enter, or chased away a customer who expressed a racial slur toward the Arab workers.”

But Stern is cautious about portraying an idyllic situation. “The issue of the balance of power is still very dramatic, and the Palestinian workers are very skeptical about the significance of working together. They have no illusions; they say: ‘We didn’t choose to be here, there’s an occupation and at the end of the day, we return to our homes.’ Sometimes they see a positive attitude as an indication of hypocrisy. They also understand why they are still working, after 10 years, in the Aroma café chain when the Jewish workers, the students, have gone on to other things.”

He says that it is actually the Jewish employees who tend to be more positively affected by this encounter. “Suddenly they discover things about the situation in East Jerusalem, suddenly they understand what it means to live on the other side of the fence and why an employee comes late in the morning.”

Purchasing power

Another area in which a slow but consistent change is taking place is the entry of Palestinians from Jerusalem to institutions of higher education in the city. An estimated 3,000 students from East Jerusalem study in Israeli colleges and universities, an increase of almost 100 percent since a decade ago. A glance at the Hebrew University reveals that in the past year there were 191 students from East Jerusalem registered to study there, an increase of about 30 percent over the previous year.

The populations have also been mingling in other venues, too. But here Stern distinguishes between the privatized places – the malls – where the Arabs of East Jerusalem have become a significant and desirable buying force in recent years, and open public spaces – the city center and the parks. He says that the global and capitalist nature of the consumer culture along with the sense of security in the malls have made the encounter there more comfortable.



Jerusalem's Sacher Park. Emil salman

But in the open public spaces, the situation is different. “In the parks, I see a zero-sum game,” says Stern. “When there are more Arabs, the Jews stop coming; that’s true of both secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews,” says Stern. “If it’s a neighborhood park, then there’s a feeling of trespassing and that contributes to the feeling of insecurity, and it doesn’t work.”

The only place where it does work is in Sacher Park. Stern says that the relative success there is related to the size of the park, which makes it possible for every group to find its own corner, and to the fact that many and varied populations come there: foreign workers from India who play cricket, groups of Christian Evangelists and a variety of people who come to play sports.



Marik Stern.

In the past months, Stern has been in charge of a workshop for planners in the Jerusalem Institute (in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Fund in Israel), intended to figure out how to plan public spaces in the city in a way that will foster encounters that are accompanied with a sense of security. One of the participants in

the workshop is architect Tamir Mansur Carmel, who together with Maayan Tokkie Carmel and Maya Atidia, redesigned Zion Square downtown as a “tolerant space.”

In the context of the workshop, about a week ago, a group of planners and administrators from Jerusalem traveled to Haifa in order to learn about mixing populations. Both are cities where Jews and Arabs live together, but there are tremendous differences between them.

The most important one is that as opposed to the Arab residents of Haifa, the Palestinians in Jerusalem are not citizens of the state and don't have the right to vote for the Knesset, or other political power. That's why many people think that even if there is an increased mixing of the populations, it won't lead to a solution of the big issues. “It will improve life, but it won't solve the real problems,” says Asmar, “because the country regards the Palestinians as a security issue.”

Menachem Klein is also pessimistic. “The cumulative weight of these [positive] phenomena is low,” he says. “We still have two ethnic groups that are separated in terms of their civil and legal status. The very fact that there are Arab customers at the Mamilla Mall doesn't make the city multinational. We're still left with a difference in the collectives: One is superior and the other inferior.”

According to Klein, “If tomorrow Israel grants complete equality to the Palestinians and there is complete mixing, then it will be possible to talk about something different. At the moment Israel sees them as a hostile collective, and Jerusalem is the center of the conflict. So maybe the floor is better than it was, but the ceiling is still very low and presses down hard, and it can't be broken.”

‘When we talk of separation under conditions of inequality, it deepens the gaps,’ says Marik Stern.



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