

Reconstructed urbanity: The rebirth of Palestinian urban life in Haifa

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ABSTRACT

Current Israeli Palestinians' claims to the city, as translated into urban forms and politics, are examined in the context of the urban–rural dichotomy that has played a major role in the construction of Palestinian identity. The paper considers this divide, analyzing meaning and content in a situation in which a Palestinian urban neighborhood represents an “Arab village”, while a former European agricultural settlement becomes the center of a flourishing Palestinian urban culture. This inversion infuses the history of urban form with a new ethno-cultural meaning, representing a hybrid notion of urbanity. The paper considers this hybrid city–village reality within the contested environment of Israel/Palestine, and examines the potential of the built form for upholding the cultural meaning and authenticity that sustain ethnolnational aspirations. The findings suggest interpretations and uses that negate unilateral understanding of the urban–rural divide.

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Introduction

The attraction of urban life under neo-liberal conditions has been incremental worldwide (Ley, 1997). Reasons for this urban preference in the non-west often resemble the pull of the industrial city in the late 18th century west. It is mainly the middle class that traditionally has been associated with urbanity (Habermas, 1989), and is now attracted to the urban life renaissance, and to the social, economic and cultural benefits it entails (The Urban Task Force, 1999). It is not, therefore, surprising that Palestinian Israelis have been, for the most part, absent from the current housing protest by Israel's middle classes (Allweil, 2013), focused mainly on the possibility of living in urban centers where the cost of living has increased the most.¹ Arabs² in Israel have refrained, for obvious political reasons, from participation in nation-wide protests (Cohen, 2009; Pappé, 2011), but neither could they be considered as mid-

dle-class and have rarely been referred to thus.³ Since the 1948 war they have mostly been living in rural areas or in small urban centers.⁴ Haifa, however, although not the largest conurbation of Arabs in Israel, has been a center of Palestinian socio-political and cultural activity, and a focus of Arab urban life for the Arab population of the Galilee. Monterescu (2008), who locates mixed cities in Israel on a continuum between polarization and pluralism, points out that while Lydda and Ramla are the most polarized (especially Lydda where segregation and poverty are greatest), and Jaffa and Acre are segmented, Haifa has experienced considerable pluralism over the years. Monterescu attributes this pluralism to more equal distribution of resources in Haifa, by comparison with other Israeli mixed cities. This might be why the Arab middle class in Haifa is growing, although the city's Arab middle class community has been flourishing since the late 19th century (Seikaly, 1995).

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¹ “Living standards in center and periphery”, presentation in seminar: *Between center and periphery*, on the occasion of the publication of *Society in Israel*, Report 3, CBS 5.1.2011.

² The term ‘Arabs’, as used in Israeli discourse, refers to the Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel. This paper uses ‘Arab’ and ‘Palestinian’ interchangeably, in order not to reify any specific title and to draw attention to the shifting and contextual character of identity.

³ According to 2007 data, the gross monthly average wage in the Arab sector was NIS 5,419 as compared to NIS 8,056 in the Jewish sector. Wage per hour for Arabs is 30% lower than for Jews at the same level, and for women 23% lower (18th Caesarea Forum for National Economic Policy, June 2010).

⁴ According to the 2006 Central Bureau of Statistics, more than 90% of the Arabs in Israel live in urban communities. But since urban communities are classified based only on population size, without reference to municipal status or if they serve as cultural economic social and political centers, most of them can hardly be considered urban.

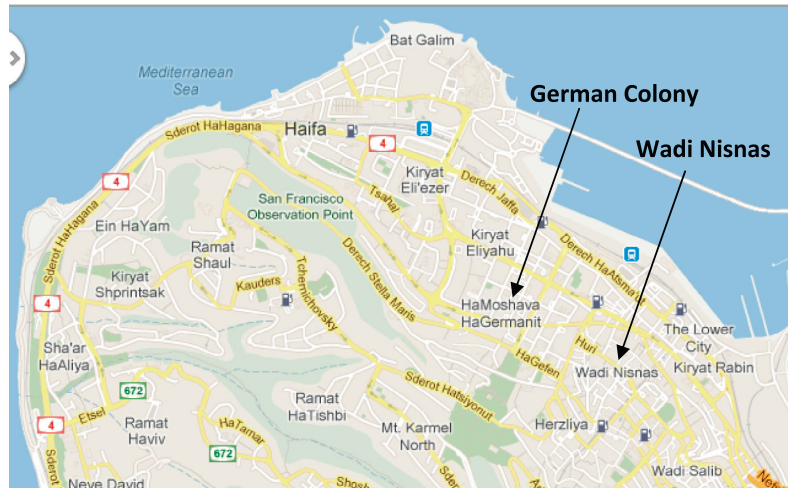


Fig. 1. Location of Wadi Nisnas and German Colony (source: Google maps).

Haifa is Israel's third largest city and an important industrial centre. Like most other mixed cities it is a place of contrasts and tensions not easily described by dichotomies that distinguish between immigrants and natives, locals and foreigners, hegemony and resistance, which are often simultaneous, and thus increasing the city's complexity. The city holds a variety of mixtures – of Muslims, Christians and Jews; of veterans and newcomers, of Mizrahi (Eastern) and Ashkenazi (Western) Jews. Haifa's urban layout is also layered and complex. Historical neighborhoods are adjacent to newer areas, and some of the latter have been built over areas destroyed in and after 1948, including the new Government Center built over the demolished Old City (Kolodney & Kallus, 2011).

Despite its freighted past, Haifa is recognized as the only city in Israel where Arabs and Jews maintain a level of coexistence. However, segregation between the two populations has always been an important feature of inter-community dynamics, but has further increased by geopolitical and historical events. Development of neighborhoods according to religious affiliations was encouraged by the Ottoman rulers of Palestine and by the British Mandate that followed (Goren, 2006), and increased during the Judaization of the city after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (Kolodney & Kallus, 2008; Segev, 1984). To this day, the Palestinian communities predominate in Lower Haifa, while Jewish communities predominate on Mount Carmel (see Fig. 1). These topographically demographic patterns reflect social and economic differences, with the Jewish community, in general, occupying the higher income brackets. However, the Christian population, traditionally considered well-off, amounts to about 55% of the Palestinians in Haifa.⁵ It is perhaps the reason why the city is becoming home to an emerging middle class of liberal Palestinians (Sa'ar, 1998), who are slowly infiltrating the formerly Jewish-dominated neighborhoods (Falah, Hoy, & Sarker, 2000).

The German Colony was built in the 19th century by German Templars as a model agricultural community. Its main north-south artery links the sea to Mount Carmel via the newly rehabilitated Bahai Gardens. Haifa Municipality began restoring the area in the late 1990s with funds from the Ministry of Tourism, assisted by the wealthy Bahai community's newly developed and extended Gardens. The aim was to attract the anticipated millennium tourists. With the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifadas and the escalation of terrorist attacks all over Israel, the project, almost completed, was about to collapse. Despite which, and against all planning provisions, it has become a major leisure venue for the Palestinians of Haifa and northern Israel, a revival of Palestinian urbanity (Fig. 2).

The adjacent Wadi Nisnas, the focus of Arab life in Haifa since 1948, offers Haifa residents and visitors an unmediated encounter with the putative "Arab village".⁶ The area was developed at the end of the 19th century, during Ottoman rule, as a Christian neighborhood outside the Old City's walls that accommodates Arab laborers from surrounding villages. In the aftermath of the 1948 war, the Wadi and its immediate surroundings was the core of Haifa's Palestinian community, Christian and Muslims alike, providing them with education, religious, and other civic and cultural services. It is characterized by mixed land use, with a rich diversity of businesses and commerce. As the only Palestinian neighborhood in Haifa where buildings and infrastructure were not destroyed during or after the war, its "Arabism" is a source of pride for those inhabitants who did not leave in 1948 (see for example: Habibi, 1988). For the municipality it is also a strategy for emphasizing Haifa's uniqueness as a 'mixed city' (Kallus, 2011, chap. 4). Especially during the Holiday of Holidays Festival in December, the narrow winding alleys and stone buildings present the neighborhood as "other" (Fig. 3).

This inversion – a Palestinian urban neighborhood representing an "Arab village" – while a European agricultural settlement becomes the centre of a flourishing Palestinian urban culture, suggests the potential of the built form to

⁵ The other 45% are mostly Moslems (Haifa Municipality (2006). Annual Statistics Report, Monograph). Within Israel Arab Christians form only a small statistical minority (8.77%) among the primarily Muslim population (82.78%). They live mainly in cities and are better-off economically (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

⁶ The term "Arab village" is used metaphorically. For discussion of the myth of the "Arab village" see: Eyal, 1993.

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