

**City**

analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

ISSN: 1360-4813 (Print) 1470-3629 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

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Jonathan Rokem

To cite this article: Jonathan Rokem (2018) Contrasting Jerusalem: contested urbanism at the crossroads, *City*, 22:1, 174-177, DOI: [10.1080/13604813.2018.1427370](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1427370)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1427370>



Published online: 15 Mar 2018.

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Review

Contrasting Jerusalem: contested urbanism at the crossroads

Jonathan Rokem 

Shaping Jerusalem: spatial planning, politics and the conflict, Francesco Chiodelli. Routledge, Research in Planning and Urban Design, 2017, 158 pages, ISBN 9781138185494 (£110, B&W illustrations).

As far as the relation between planning and politics is concerned, Jerusalem represents an exceptional urban case to study. Jerusalem is a symbolic and tangible focal point in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, earning its position in urban studies and planning literature as one of the most ethno-nationally divided, polarised and contested cities (Bollens 1998; Klien 2001; Dumper 2014; Shlay and Rosen 2015). Competing religious and political narratives have affected Jerusalem's development and over the past half-century Israeli ethno-national principles have held a significant role in forming the contemporary city. For anyone contemplating about what our urban world can become under forces of extreme nationalism and exclusionary planning policy, Jerusalem is an important lesson and cautionary warning for a growing number of contested cities. It is with these developments that *Shaping Jerusalem: Spatial Planning, Politics and the Conflict* engages with in further rigour and detail.

The book's author Francesco Chiodelli has over the past decade researched Israeli planning politics and practices in Jerusalem. The text opens with the statement; '[t]his is not another book about the Old City of Jerusalem' (Preface), differentiating it from most of the prevalent academic social science

literatures focus on the city's worldwide historical and religious significance. Instead we are presented with an intimate examination of Jerusalem's contested spatial politics over the past decades with a specific interest in recent dominant spatial and social transformations. Not surprisingly the principal focus throughout the text remains the city's tangible and symbolic geopolitical role in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and why and how urban planning policy and practice has been a dominant tool to enhance one group's dominance over the other. There is commendable attention to detail in Chiodelli practical account of the production of unequal power relations and the formation of what has since 1967 become a partisan urban expansion project, with the aim of reinforcing sole Israeli spatial, political and demographic supremacy in Jerusalem (Margalit 2006).

The book is organised across three key sections, conjointly reviewing some of the major transformations since Jerusalem's 1967 expansion¹; (1) planning Jewish neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, (2) Israel's (lack) of sustainable urban policies and implantation of the dark side of planning (Yiftachel 1998) towards Palestinian's and (3) the 'barrier-wall'² with its wide-ranging social and spatial discriminatory implications. The

book effectively reviews the one-sided strategic planning policy and practice. On the one hand restricting any major future Palestinian expansion and demolishing what are zoned as 'illegally built housing' excluded from the option of receiving planning permission by a discriminatory planning regime (Marom 2004), and on the other hand, erecting massive new neighbourhoods and infrastructure for Jewish residents in the annexed Eastern side of the city and its West Bank hinterlands (Rokem and Allegra 2016).

One of the central themes in the book is the exclusion of Palestinian communities cut off by the 'barrier-wall'.² These impoverished walled enclaves have an unofficially estimated population of 80,000 residents. In concurrence with Chiodelli's projection that these areas were deliberately left on the Eastern side of the 'barrier-wall', the current Israeli right-wing Netanyahu government is in the process of formulating a new law with the aim of omitting precisely these Palestinian neighbourhoods from the municipality's administrative boundary. In practice, it would imply the population living in these areas are striped from their Jerusalem residency cards and will no longer have what is already a restricted 'right to the city'. The Israeli right-wing politicians see this change as critical in balancing the politically charged demography of the city in favour of the Jewish majority in what will be the first modification of Jerusalem's municipal boundary since 1967.

This is a new phase in what has been labelled 'the war over demography' (Fenster 2004). The Israel Central Bureau of Statistics estimated that at the end of 2013 the population of Jerusalem numbered 816,000. The Jewish population totalled 515,000 (63%) and the Palestinian population totalled 301,000 (37%). Unofficial statistics suggest that the actual demography is closer to a 43% Palestinians/57% Jews ratio. Omitting about 80,000 Palestinian residents from Jerusalem's population would dramatically shift the demography in favour of the Jewish majority and may also translate to changing

the current official Israeli planning strategy of maintaining 40%/60% demographic balance to the original post-1967 target of keeping a 30% Palestinians/70% Jewish ratio in Jerusalem.

The book's primary emphasis on the ethno-national conflict and its prominent manifestation in defining Jerusalem's contemporary contested urban development is written with notable attention to facts on the ground and joins several other prominent contributions (for some illustrations, see Bollens 2000; Klein 2001; Dumper 2014; Shlay and Rosen 2015). It is in the second most important aim of the book 'The Lesson of Jerusalem', outlined in its final section that it holds the most promising and innovative potential for urban studies. In the last paragraph of the book, Chiodelli opens up a new deliberation where he provides us with a hint towards what we can learn from Jerusalem's exceptional conditions:

'The second lesson of the city relates to the peculiarities of planning an urban space. Some of these peculiarities (such as the unavoidable redistributive effects of spatial planning, its nexus with the political sphere and its none neutrality) are clearly evident in Jerusalem as they are so greatly amplified by the uniqueness of the context. On the contrary, in cases where ethnic and social tensions are lower and the stakes are less important from all points of view (historical, political, religious and symbolic), these aspects are mitigated and sometimes reduced to a minimum. As a result they tend to despair from view. However Jerusalem teaches us that one fact remains: these aspects are at the core of spatial planning; consequently they should be taken into account when one considers the organisation, regulation and design of urban space [in other urban areas].' (p. 137, emphasis added)

In other words, Jerusalem's extreme conditions point to emergent contested processes more generally taking shape in other cities. Located at the intersection of Europe, Africa and Asia, Jerusalem holds a pivotal

metaphoric and practical illustration as the historical, geographical and theoretical cross-roads of global urban studies. Placed between the *urban North and South*, it has the potential of adding to current debates of 'learning from anywhere' to enrich a more global urban studies (Robinson 2016). However, over the last few decades the city of Jerusalem has been labelled as one of the most polarised (Bollens 2000), divided (Klein 2001; Wasserstein 2001), contested (Safier 2001; Rokem 2013), ethnocentric (Yiftachel and Yacobi 2002), colonial (Yiftachel 2016; Shlomo 2016), neo-colonial and neo-apartheid (Yacobi 2015) to mention some of the prevalent examples. All these contributions position the ethno-national conflict and unequal power relations as the principal force shaping Jerusalem.

Whilst this is partially true, any description of a city through a one-dimensional conceptual lens suggests everything can be reduced to a specific frame. In reality below the looming geopolitical conflict a multi-layered and dynamically evolving urban everyday activity continues. It is precisely this overlapping and contrasting dimension of conflict and ordinariness in everyday urban life that makes Jerusalem such a valuable case to learn from. While so far most of the academic literature depicts Jerusalem through its extreme political and violent fault-lines, there has been less attention given to the full picture of daily conditions on the ground for those who are living within its exclusionary walled municipal borders. It is from this perspective that the book adds an important contribution to the emerging interest in *Learning from Jerusalem: to rethink urban conflicts in the 21st century* (Rokem 2016). Chiodelli's theoretical contribution opens up ways to comprehend the potential lessons from one specific city to develop a wider theoretical conversation informing the growing interest in learning from other places to deepen urban studies theory and practice.

The concluding fifth section uses the earlier chapters' experiences to ground a wider

theoretical discussion. Moving beyond the description of the national conflict and its implication on the geopolitics of urban space brings a new opportunity to contrast the city's unequal production of exclusionary power relations more generally. It brings to the fore a need to reconsider planning policy more broadly asking what we can learn from extreme cases such as Jerusalem to enrich our understanding of planning and housing policies that marginalise urban residents across the realm of cities. As such, the book accomplishes its chief aim from an empirical perspective showcasing through detailed maps and in-depth policy analysis Jerusalem's local dark political conditions and their unequal impact on urban space and society are exposed. Current trends suggest that if the status quo remains, Jerusalem will continue to fragment along ethno-national and religious lines. Existing imbalances of political power are likely to intensify with the population trajectories of the Jewish ultra-orthodox population on the one hand and the Palestinian on the other. Nevertheless, it is hoped that given the abiding international interest in the city a shift in local political motivations will allow it to move on to new, more positive tracks that build on its long history of coexistence (Rokem and Vaughan 2017).

What this book teaches us beyond the tragedy of prioritising Israeli national interests leading to violent and one-sided use of a planning in Jerusalem is a need for a general wakeup call to scrutinise neo-liberal urban planning practices and the different degrees and nuances that they overlap with national and ethnic exclusionary politics. There are both political and humanitarian concerns that is principally *urban* and affecting the everyday life of city dwellers where the ordinary and not only the military becomes geopolitical, 'relational sites' (Rokem and Boano 2018). As researchers and residents in a predominantly urbanised world, we can no longer ignore expanding violence, disaster and division. Urban environments across the planet are becoming hypersecuritised and yet insecure (Rokem

et al. 2017). For anyone with an interest in an in-depth account of the recent politics and planning changes in Jerusalem, I would warmly recommend to read *Shaping Jerusalem*. But I would suggest reading this book is also an important warning sign pointing us at some of the ethno-national and religious forces shaping the nature of contested cities on a global scale.

Funding

This work was supported by Horizon 2020 Framework Programme [658742].

Notes

- 1 There are several different ways of describing the outcome of the 1967 War and the post-war changes in Jerusalem. Depending on political narratives, some of the more common terms are unification, annexation and occupation.
- 2 Different terminologies reflecting political narratives are used to describe the 'barrier-wall' such as ('security barrier', 'separation fence' and 'apartheid wall') to simplify, the common term 'barrier-wall' is used in the text.

ORCID

Jonathan Rokem  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-5040>

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Jonathan Rokem is at the UCL Department of Geography, University College London.
Email: j.rokem@ucl.ac.uk