

Sounding the Streets of Jerusalem

ABIGAIL WOOD HEARS MUSIC THAT BREAKS BARRIERS BETWEEN DIVERSE NEIGHBOURS



Musician dressed as King David, Old City, Jerusalem May 2008



Places are defined not only by geographical landmarks but also by the lives of the people who inhabit them.

From the sixth-century Madaba mosaic to the imagined landscapes of European painters, even before the era of photography, visual images of Jerusalem have been widespread and numerous. Today, many of Jerusalem's sites are instantly recognisable icons, continually reproduced as postcards, in guidebooks, maps, websites and holiday photos.

Jerusalem's geography is as iconic as her buildings. Mapmakers reproduce the

familiar outlines of the Old City, adding pointers to those sites most relevant to their target audience. Lines on the map neatly divide the city into quarters, demarcating borders between religious and ethnic enclaves. Maps play an important role in our conceptualisation of urban landscapes. Nevertheless, they also represent an illusory conflation of space and place: the idea that a place is defined by the space it inhabits; a relatively unchanging physical environment circumscribed by fixed boundaries.

The streets of Jerusalem are not just mundane spaces. Rather, they are a place where the symbolic and everyday lives of the city interact, and they are a space for performance. The establishment of street performance as a fundamental component of the symbolic life of Jerusalem stems already from the Biblical narrative: in the second book of Samuel we learn that when King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to the City of David, it was accompanied by loud, joyous sound, blasts of the shofar and dancing.

Today, Jerusalem's streets continue to be an important place for performance. If pilgrims retrace the performance sites of Biblical times, as Israel's capital,

Jerusalem's streets also host a spectrum of contemporary events, from political protests to Gay Pride events; from expressions of national pride to outpourings of emotion. In fact, performance seems such a fundamental component of Jerusalem street life, that last summer a complete programme of open-air entertainment was offered in the new Mamilla mall, even though the street itself was still under construction.

Arguments about space are generally at the forefront of political discussions about contemporary Jerusalem. Physical separation is seen as a tool of conflict management; discussions frequently centre on maps, which privilege exclusive ownership: each area 'belongs' to one

Streets as a place of encounter

particular community or group. Yet outdoor soundscapes manipulate the mundane and symbolic landscapes of Jerusalem, and in doing so allow a more flexible space for interaction.

I took the photograph on the next page last summer in the Jewish Quarter of



the Old City. Here is a barefoot, hippy-styled man playing a djembe, a West African hand drum which has become immensely popular in world music circles. As he plays, he's watching another man in jeans, who is ululating and belly dancing. Completing the scene is a small strictly Orthodox girl, who is watching, totally enraptured. Leaving aside the interesting juxtaposition of music and dance styles, here we have a two-way encounter in sound. The musician and dancer have settled into a spot which has pragmatic advantages for busking (you can see their hat on the floor): the stone streets and arched roof give a resonant acoustic space, and they can ply for trade from passers-by and several nearby cafes.

However, as far as symbolic space is concerned, their presence is more surprising, while their 'look' suggests that they are secular Israelis, clutching the kit of the international hippy traveller, they have placed themselves in a primarily religious area, just beyond the staircase that leads down to the Western Wall. The girl, by contrast, is a much more frequent figure to find on this street – but she is captivated by the kind of performance she's unlikely to experience in her own community.

Sound can also help redefine the nature of street encounters. Consider the following scene, which took place last July outside the Tower of David. Passing by, I heard recorded marching band-style music. A group of American students were standing on the street, grouped around a tour guide who was playing the music, illustrating a historical point about military campaigns of the past. Behind the students, a group of soldiers in sandy-coloured uniforms came out of the Tower of David museum, hanging around on the steps.

Seizing the opportunity, a few come down the steps to pose with the Americans – I saw a boy pick two pretty bare-

shouldered American girls for his photo. The scene quickly breaks up: the guide calls "March! Left, right, left right", and his group follow, the music still playing from his amplifier. The soldiers regroup, and I hear one girl defend herself "Why? But I like Americans!"

Meanwhile, a group of black-garbed Chasidic boys pass on their way to the Jewish quarter. One rushes by with his fingers in his ears. After all, in the religious calendar it's the month of Av, when it's forbidden to listen to music, in mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE.

Here, then, we have a complex encounter, in which three everyday elements of Jerusalem life overlap: tourism, army service and pilgrimage. The place itself had different significances for each group: a stop on a guided tour, illustrating part of Jerusalem's relatively recent military past; a convenient waiting place outside a museum; and a thoroughfare, the quickest way from the Jaffa Gate to the Western Wall.

Most interestingly though, while the tourists seem to be the outsiders here, the music that accompanied them gave them ownership over the scene: the soldiers

A mediator between inside and outside

descended to participate in their space then returned to the steps, and the Chasidic children tried to circumvent the space. Music, it seems, temporarily inverted the normal power relationship between the groups.

In visual terms, 'inside' and 'outside' spaces are generally clearly defined. One we can see; the other is generally hidden from view, and entrance may be restricted, marked by a threshold or doorway. Sound, however, does not respect thresholds. Walking along King David St in the Old City one day I noticed a mosque behind shops I had walked past tens of times. I had never seen the inside space, but that day I heard it: sound spilling out of the



doorway revealed the activities of an inside space.

Private sound spaces that are revealed on the streets do not even have to be heard. A vibrant part of Jerusalem street life is the omnipresent poster boards, advertising concerts, festivals, special offers, political events, religious proclamations and more. Via posters, musical events announce their presence in the city soundscape. Particularly interesting in the inside-outside equation is the bright orange poster in this picture,

A mediator between between history and modernity, sacred and mundane

advertising women-only dance and exercise classes. While, following religious codes of modesty, the dancing intentionally takes place behind closed doors, out of the sight of men, the poster brings this dancing into the public sphere. In the Old City of Jerusalem, historical space and sacred space frequently overlap.

At the simplest level, music creates a performance space, which in turn allows the musicians to perform history.

On Sukkot in 2006, a band dressed in quasi-Biblical costumes occupied a prominent performance space just inside the Jaffa Gate. Their music – modern religious songs – didn't in itself



have much of a connection to Jerusalem's biblical past, and neither did their electrical performance gear. However, in donning stylised Biblical costumes (which themselves draw heavily on artistic conventions of Biblical imagery), the street performers project a historical image, connecting today's tourism in the Old City during the intermediate days of Sukkot to Sukkot as Biblical pilgrimage festival.

Whereas this band projected a rather loose image relating to the religious history of Jerusalem, a more concrete