

Alona Nitzan-Shiftan
Seizing Jerusalem: The Architectures of Unilateral Unification
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 376 pp., 8 color and 129 b/w illus. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 9780816694280

Seizing Jerusalem elegantly entwines the history of modern architecture with nation building and state policy. In particular, it weaves the history of architecture together with the history of Zionism after the 1967 Six-Day War and the unification of Jerusalem, when the city’s population tripled in size. This book is not the first to examine the development of modern architecture in Israel and its connection to sociopolitical issues. The controversial 2003 publication A Civilian Occupation is perhaps the most familiar to architectural historians, yet a number of important books have tackled this subject. What makes Alona Nitzan-Shiftan’s study unique, however, is her thorough exploration of “the agency of architecture” (3). She underscores the impact of architecture on sociopolitical formations, as opposed to the reverse, and explains that she views architecture “neither as a mere reflection of the agenda of individual architects, nor as a spatial technique representing meaning beyond its confines” (3).

Echoing observations by many architectural historians of the modern Middle East, in chapter 1 Nitzan-Shiftan considers the evident tensions between modernist architecture’s investments in history and its orientation toward the future. After World War II, while the Israeli nation aspired to be modern, it was at the same time deeply invested in its ancient roots. In chapter 2, Nitzan-Shiftan traces works by a generation of architects who were mostly born and raised in Israel, commonly known as the sabra (Israeli-born) architects. Through analysis of select examples, such as housing in Gilo by Ram Karmi and Ma’alot Dafna by the Sho’p Team, she shows how sabra architects appropriated Palestinian vernacular and religious sites understood to have links to a Jewish past. She argues that this approach was rooted in Israeli nationalism, but it also owed much to the contemporaneous global embrace of phenomenological approaches to architecture, widely known as place making. Set in motion during the 1960s by urban activists like Jane Jacobs and champions of vernacular building such as Bernard Rudofsky, place making aimed to create spaces that would promote shared identity through the direct engagement of local topographies and histories. Through place making, Israeli architects embraced forms and ideas later associated with postmodernism and critical regionalism. Thus, the local attempt to create a new home for a generation of Jews who had suffered the traumas of the Holocaust and displacement also complemented global trends. However, as we read in chapter 3, the seemingly innocent and utopian dream of place making soon led to state projects that appropriated local architectural styles and land, particularly land belonging to Palestinians. The Ministry of Housing’s expansion of Jewish settlements soon became one of the leading sources of tension between Israelis and Palestinians.

In chapter 4 we are introduced to the influential mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, an unwavering Zionist of the Ben-Gurion school who maintained his position as mayor for three decades (1965–93). Kollek’s ambitions to legitimate Jewish rule over Jerusalem provided architects with a unique opportunity to explore the possibilities and limits of modernist design, whether as built form or as political and social action. Although Kollek was interested in cultural, rather than political, Zionism, his systematic “Judaization of Jerusalem” went hand in hand with the 1965 Planning and Building Law, Israel’s victory over East Jerusalem in 1967, and the 1968 Jerusalem master plan. Israel’s military victory in 1967 was accompanied by new state initiatives that included architectural elements modeled on British colonial styles of the mandate period. Such was the case with Arye Dvir’s 1969 National Park Plan for Jerusalem, inspired by the picturesque Silwan Village in East Jerusalem, which had a Muslim-majority population before 1967. Dvir belonged to the so-called Anglo circle—architects trained according to the building traditions and sensibilities of the British. Despite their ostensibly benevolent and idealistic intentions, the members of the Anglo circle envisioned projects that led to further expansion into the unoccupied territories, even as they featured a romanticized and Orientalizing style referencing Arab vernacular architecture of both Muslim and Christian populations. These appropriations did not go unchallenged.

Chapter 5 features, among other issues, the critical voices of high-profile international writers and architects, many of whom had already been invited by Kollek to participate in building what he called “the sacred city of mankind.” Lewis Mumford decried the state’s privileging of nationalist ambitions over spiritual sentiments. Louis Kahn insisted on the importance of universal human values while many others warned against the consequences of master planning projects. Nitzan-Shiftan aptly regards these reactions as early expressions of postnationalist discourses that align with contemporary forces of globalization in Jerusalem. Indeed, today nongovernmental organizations and independent firms have assumed roles that were previously maintained solely by the government. The extent to which these new independent and diverse forces will be able to resist the pressures of neoliberalism remains to be seen.

The sixth chapter of the book examines Moshe Safdie’s design for the Western Wall Plaza. Although aimed at healing the wounds of the city, the project ultimately was unrealized. Nonetheless, Nitzan-Shiftan’s analysis of the building’s plans and the debates that ensued sheds light on the complexity of nationalist and religious ideologies. As the book nears its conclusion, the reader is provided with details of the spatial segregation and land confiscation, among other discriminatory acts, that led to the 1987 Palestinian war of independence. The two Palestinian intifadas
contributed to the creation of a different Jerusalem, one defined by bypass roads and a gigantic separation wall. These developments had profoundly negative effects on people’s daily lives.

The history of Jerusalem is certainly unique, but the dynamics traced in this book also resonate with the politics of architecture in other parts of the world. Current discussions around President Donald Trump’s plans to build a wall on the U.S.–Mexico border, for instance, testify to the broader relevance of Nitzan-Shiftan’s historical research. How can we shape ethnically diverse communities that are unified but not unilaterally so? How can we build cities that are safe but also more just and humane?

Nitzan-Shiftan addresses these queries in enlightening ways, although she admits to being unable to provide answers for all of them. She concludes the book by characterizing Jerusalem as an agonistic democratic city. Relying on Chantal Mouffe’s theories, she identifies Jerusalem as a place that continues to contain and manage conflict rather than resolve it. This conclusion is insightful, but regrettably brief.

Through meticulous analysis of varied projects, plans, and buildings, and the brilliant use of critical theory, Nitzan-Shiftan masterfully demonstrates how the profession of architecture can actively shape political discourse rather than simply reflect or respond to it. Such an approach is important for architectural history. However, in placing emphasis on buildings’ materiality and on accounts of professional builders, Nitzan-Shiftan leaves out the voices of ordinary people who lived in these spaces or were barred from using them. There are a few exceptions, such as her discussion of popular demonstrations against new settlements in the early 1970s (87–89), but she relies primarily on knowledge and information produced by elites and experts. Even when nonarchitects are brought in, they are politicians, journalists, and major religious figures, such as the archbishop of Jerusalem.

Additional images of resident displacements and building demolitions—such as the ones shown of New Ramot (97) and the Mughrabee Quarter (234–35), or those analyzed by scholars like Ariella Azoulay—would have been helpful. Similarly absent are the stories of those ordinary Jews who have been ghettoized in suburban neighborhoods because of security concerns. What is more, the book contributes, inadvertently perhaps, to the idea that Palestinians have not attempted to engage as professionals. What contributions have Palestinians made, apart from their militant defiance and their engagement in preservation activities? (This topic is briefly addressed at the book’s end [295].) To what extent have their lack of participation been a means of protesting Israel’s legitimacy (207), and to what degree has it been a result of their systematic expulsion by powerful agents? Answering these questions may go beyond the scope of this already lengthy book, but an attempt to do so could have generated a more nuanced narrative.

However, for highlighting the role of architecture with sophistication—and for her erudite writing and years of meticulous archival research—Nitzan-Shiftan should be given much credit. Her book shows how Zionist ideologies, intensified during the 1960s and 1970s through Jerusalem’s rising built environment, reverberate into the current moment. They do this amid renewed conflicts prompted by the current U.S. president’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and his plans to build a new embassy there.

Portions of the research presented have appeared in previous publications, but this beautifully illustrated book also offers copious new material, including extensive interviews with experts and previously unpublished archival documents. A comprehensive bibliography is sorely missing, but the index and notes are nothing short of outstanding. It is worth noting that the book’s publication coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of Israel’s appropriation of East Jerusalem, and that its cover is animated by the colors of the Israeli flag, an allusion to the nationalist projects discussed within. For a less knowledgeable audience, the publication date and choice of cover might project the very nationalist paradoxes that Nitzan-Shiftan criticizes. These issues do not, however, detract from the overall quality of the project. Along with the author, the University of Minnesota Press must be commended for producing yet another outstanding work of architectural history.

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Notes

Jennifer Mack  
The Construction of Equality: Syriac Immigration and the Swedish City  
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At a moment when divisive and xenophobic rhetoric about immigrants is on the rise, “place histories” can illuminate migrants’ critical place-making practices and contextualize their complex relationships with their new homes as well as the ones they left behind. In The Construction of Equality: Syriac Immigration and the Swedish City, Jennifer Mack presents a social, spatial, and urban history of Södertälje, a city on the periphery of Stockholm, over the past fifty years. Drawing on a range of methodologies, Mack guides the reader through richly empirical case studies while also demonstrating how ethnographic research can inform historical analysis and contribute to the telling of vital architectural and urban stories.

In large part, this book explores how Syriac spatial and building practices have disrupted Swedish architectural and planning philosophies based on the notion that formal homogeneity and uniformity promote social and economic equality. Mack also examines the assumption—made by many urban planners, politicians,