Designing the Western Wall Plaza:

National and Architectural Controversies*

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Immediately after Israel captured Jerusalem's Old City during the 1967 war it bulldozed the Mugharbe Quarter off the area adjacent to the Western Wall. National, municipal and military authorities agreed that the corridor between the neighborhood and the Wall was too narrow for a nation to gather and 'meet its past.' Once the post war stream of pilgrims reduced, Israelis were taken by surprise. The central assembly space of the State of Israel, and the holiest site for Jews since Titus destroyed Herod's Second Temple in A.D. 70, became an amorphous field of debris and awesome stones.
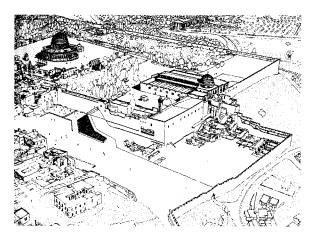

Fig. 1. Arthur Kutcher, Existing condition of the Western Wall environs.

Captivated by the site, architects harried to propose designs for the plaza. Louis Kahn, Isamu Noguchi, Aronson and Kutcher, Fisher and Maestro, Denys Lasdun, and Superstudio contended the much debated yet authorized design of Moshe Safdie. Clearly, neither Safdie nor his contenders suggested mere design solutions for such a complicated site. Their proposals were fierce manifestos in two distinct yet closely connected battles. One was over the balance between Judaism and Statehood in a rapidly transforming Israeli society. The other was over the course that modern architecture should take after the dissolution of CIAM.

This national-architectural controversy demanded great political and emotional investment. In what follows I will argue that as a result the competing designs offer rare scholarly opportunity to study the ways in which concrete architectural projects do not only express

contending ideologies, but also take, in the forms, compositions and techniques they suggest, distinct positions in fierce national and architectural debates.

Moshe Safdie's 1974 design proposal alone had generated two ministerial committees which reached opposing conclusions, extensive public hearings, and a 1980 revised version of the architect. Like all other proposals, it was never executed. Since this design became the measure cord for other projects, it forms the spine of my discussion.
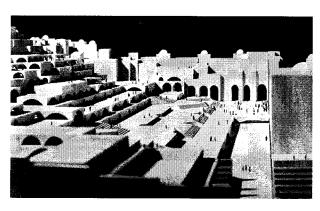

Fig. 2. Moshe Safdie, First design proposal for the Western Wall Plaza, 1974.

Safdie's design, which extended over 60000 square meters, created a huge hierarchical theater of descending cubes. It was inspired by Yosephus Plavius description of Herod's Jerusalem as well as by the Oriental vernacular of the city. The theater overlooked the Wall, which gained additional 9 meters by digging 12 courses of stone until it reached the Herodian Street underneath. This design had few unmistakable qualities: it monumentalized the Wall; it was interwoven into the archeological sites, the architecture of which it incorporated; it was rich in Oriental/biblical imagery; and finally, it was designed for prefabricated technology. It was therefore the ultimate expression of Israeli nationalism—uniting biblical past with technological progress and creating fast "facts on the ground": its planned completion in six years time was one of its propagated merits.

I will argue that Safdie's winning formula of fusing "past", "present" and "future" granted his holistic design a manifesto power as well as harsh criticism. By "past" I mean the treatment of history and archeology,

"present" relates to notions of urbanity, community and place, while "future" brings forth issues of morphology and technology. I will discuss each of these categories as a setting for the two aforementioned battles: One, as I've stated, was between Judaism and Statehood. The State's will to "Israelize" the Wall's precinct unveiled the tension between Jerusalem as the primordial *Jewish* memory and aspiration, and that of Jerusalem as a physical, tangible place under *Israeli* sovereignty. The other battle was between high modernists and their critics. For the latter the site demonstrated the shortcomings of 'matter of fact' modernism to address the depths of sanctity, history, and authenticity. On the contrary, for "rear-garde" modernists the site enhanced the bond with the textual nature of Judaism and its resistance to visual representation.

PAST

The architectural challenges of the site were grave. In spite of its highest national and religious significance the plaza is topographically the lowest in its basin. It lacks firm elevations besides the Wall itself that stands along the space, escaping the potential of becoming a classical focal point. Since Temple Mount determines the site's imagined roof, its main potential for greater monumentality lays underground: in order to achieve extra height one cannot build up, but rather digs in. Unfortunately, however, the ground is the site's most uncertain property. Its mysterious archeological rubble is that material history is constructed from. It is therefore subjected to the dynamics of writing contesting histories, a favorite right of being in this region.
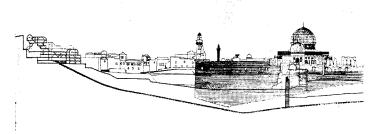

Fig. 3. Arthur Kutcher, Existing section across Temple Mount, the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter.

Hence, the treatment of "past" can be grasped most clearly in the various sections, which are so pertinent to this project. The bulk of archeological rubble occupies the underground triangle between the 67' level, the Wall and the bedrock. It is intersected by the thirteen meters wide Herodian Street, which stood at the foot of Herod's Second Temple. The rubble and debris were accumulated during Christian and Muslim rule over the city. For Jews they represent the 2000 years of exile from Jerusalem and the Wall within. While all proposals agree that the Herodian level should be uncovered in order to expose the full grandeur of the Wall, the measure of exposure, as well as the destiny of the archeological substance above Herod's street, are the subject of conflicting creeds.

At stake are the meaning different strands in Judaism attribute to the Jewish Exile and the way they value Jewish life in the Diaspora. The Zionist leaders, who established the Israeli nation-state, constructed a secular, nationalist version of Judaism, which recovered the Bible as a founding text, and valued those periods in which the Jewish people enjoyed sovereign national life. The flip coin of this vision is a total

negation of Diaspora life. The Jewish Exile is therefore considered as a rupture in Jewish history, which is now healed by national independence, moreover, by the return after 2000 years to the actual sites of Jewish origin.

Safdie's design concretized precisely this vision. He reached the full breadth of the Herodian Level so that "Jews praying at the Wall would stand on the actual stones, at the actual Wall of the Second Temple, exactly as Herod had constructed it." [Safdie 89:217] For this purpose he totally erased the '67 level, on which Jews prayed for half a millennium. Yet, he had to consider the huge volume of rubble and debris underneath. Orthodox Jews feared it might contain unpredictable archeological finds and were therefore reluctant to authorize the venture. Safdie pacified the worried rabbis: "[The Mayor] [he told them] even recommended that a treaty be drawn up... which would declare that no matter what was found above the Herodian Street, it would be removed. It might be documented and photographed first but it would be removed."(Safdie 1989: 190)

One can hardly imagine a more tangible/concise manner of selecting history in such a contained site. First, one discovers its traces and documents its evidences; then puts it apart, dematerializes and de-territorizes it, i.e., transforms its physical presence into text and puts it out of site/sight. The material edifices of the unwanted past are thus removed from the formative site of collective memory. Architecturally formative because in it collective memory is forged through the bodily experience of space/place/built form. The less desired past evaporates into the theater space, the central assembly place of the Jewish nation. The way is cleared for the archeological race toward the foundation of Temple Mount, the concrete indisputable presence of the biblical blueprint. Once this biblical destination is reached, the design does not allocate secluded places for the archeology of selected "other" times, but uses ancient architecture as integral part of the present complex. Present and biblical time thus coalesce.

This Zionist version of Jewish history alarmed Michael Turner, a consultant to the *Planning Research for the Western Wall Precinct* of 1972. He lamented that Safdie's design looses this particular Jerusalemite trait "in which you walk through history and you feel the entire lineage of Judaism... The six hundred years of the Wall as the Wailing Wall, are also inseparable part of our history" he professed, it "should receive a microcosmic expression in this site." (Cassuto 1975: 104) Turner further contested Safdie's exclusive focus on antiquity. Instead of the desired fusion of new and ancient, Turner envisioned "...A theater in which one begs in front of archeological finds." (Cassuto 1975: 104) He was afraid that the biblical Wall, naked of its two millennia of Jewish worship, might become an archeological edifice rather than a living Jewish core.

The *Planning Research* Turner participated in clearly indicated that *different* planners should build the space. The Team forcefully negated the option of building "according to a unified plan, which will necessarily be rigid and devoid of the notion of time" (Kutcher and Aronson 1972). Unlike Safdie's reluctance to touch and intervene in historical substance and vernacular forms, they had neither the desire nor the means with which to articulate appropriated architecture. Their mandate, they insisted, was to delineate a program of spatial relationship, which would accommodate functional demands of different groups participating in activities near the Wall, a "do" and "don't dare to" list. According to John Summerson's late definition of modern architecture as a break with the antiquated authoritarian world of forms toward the primacy of the program, the position the Team took was overwhelmingly modernist (Summerson 1957).
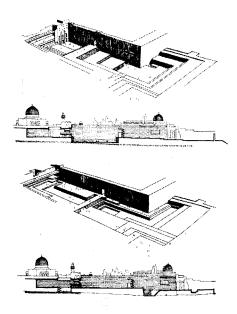
Fig. 4. Aronson, Kutcher et al., Design options for the Western Wall Plaza.

The sixteen different design options the Team devised, as well as the proposal Fisher and Maestro's Florence Team prepared according to their recommendations, challenged Safdie's design on both national and architectural grounds. In the battle between Judaism and Statehood, they forcefully forged the former. They emphatically retained different physical levels (Aronson and Kutcher) or multiple decks (Fisher and Maestro) which animated Jewish experience throughout history. The sectional triangle of debris, which Safdie eliminated, became *the* focus of the design. Its richness restored the meaning of Jewish life in Exile, which carried such negative connotations in Zionist culture.

Architecturally, these proposals retained a modernist edge. Both Teams insisted that a full-fledged program had to precede any design activity. Such program, due to the significance of the site, had to draw on religious and philosophical thought in addition to functional demands and archeological considerations. Only when such program would be established, could an accumulative design process be on its way. The Teams assumed a rather direct translation of this program into issues such as the exposure of the Wall, the organization of the plaza in different functional levels, or the incorporation of institutions.

Conversely, Safdie did not believe that the rationale of a program could determine design. His conceptual program evolved in the interplay between the topography and boundaries of the site, the inner logic of the Zionist narrative, and the spatial and formal ordering of an archeological uncertainty. The program did not *generate* the resultant image, but was *contained* in it. Reason and form were inseparable: they were mutually inclusive rather than a source and an outcome. Safdie's form was his *idea* of the Wall.
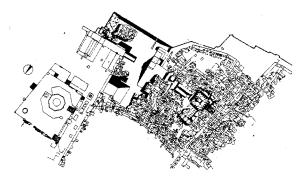

Fig. 5. Louis Kahn, design proposal for the Hurva Synagogue and the Western Wall Plaza, circa 1967.

The origin of Safdie's architectural position went back to Louis Kahn, of whom he considered himself a disciple. Kahn was invited to design the Hurva Synagogue immediately after the 1967 War. The significance of the Hurva, he suggested, was inseparable from that of the Western Wall. He therefore treated them both as one urban complex, in which he reconstructed the primal notion of a synagogue. The Western Wall was the *ark* while the Hurva was the *bimah* from which the prayer is conducted. That the bottom of the dig out Wall was the lowest in the Old City and the Hurva rose above both the Dome of the Rock and the Holy Sepulcher, accentuate this primal relations (Karmi 1998).

In the Jewish Quarter Kahn investigated the primal architectonic idea of faith and worship, the idea from which building types of communal worship were later developed. A Jew himself, he granted Judaism this primal driving force. The strength of his design lies in the cohesive treatment of architecture, urbanism and religion as one inclusive idea, an ultimate place of pilgrimage.

PRESENT

There is nothing like the notion of "place" to better explain the intersection of national and architectural discourses. Nationally, the Statist will to to make the Wall into a symbolic yet concrete place of nationhood contradicted Jewish views of the Wall as "[a] place which its entirety, its full depth, is made of what is beyond it," a "supra-place and no-place." Architecturally, "place" was exactly the notion postwar architects worldwide provoked in order to demonstrate the modernist deficiency in addressing the human need for identifiable locus of belonging.

Israeli born architects enacted this discourse in order to create a self-evident Israeli place. After the '67 War there was a growing feeling of public mistrust in the modern architecture of the nation-building years. It failed, so it seemed, to express the symbolic return of Jews to their biblical core. Yet, the desire to shape Israeli Jerusalem as a mirror of its (biblical) past acquired a new dimension once it engaged the reality of concrete architectural forms: the "authentic" Jerusalem vernacular, that indigenous expression national movements thrive on, was, for the most part, "Arab."

This predicament played a central role in contemporary Israeli architectural discourse, which constantly evoked the Arab village as the ultimate native expression 'of the place'. Assuredly, vernacular architecture was studied worldwide by contemporary architects in order to discover the primordial relationships between man/community and build form. Safdie was also drawn to the Arab village Malha, which underlined the proposal for his Jerusalem habitat. The community he envisioned "was akin to an Arab village in the sense that it followed the hill, each unit had its roof garden, and a series of pathways followed the topography intimately." (Safdie 1989: 28)

This description is consistent with Safdie's theater in front of the Wall, and not surprisingly so. Post-'67 Israeli architects regarded Arab material culture as backward yet authentic. It must have kept, so it seemed, the original building traditions of the region, that is, biblical traditions hence Jewish origin. Arab vernacular was therefore received as legitimate inspiration for Jerusalem's new residential construction and urban settings. However, for "inspiration in designing Jewish institutions" (Safdie 89:115) Safdie turned to distinct historical precedence: to Herod. He admittedly endeavored at no less than a thorough revival of Herodian architecture.

The inevitable question was: could the architectural expression of the Western Wall precinct be drawn from Arab/biblical vocabulary? Or alternatively, should it provoke such Herodian revival? More importantly: if the architecture of the Wall precinct was the ultimate manifestation of Israeli Statehood, then it had the mandate of shaping a

collective image of it. What was, then, the architectural message that the independent Jewish nation-state brought to the Old City? Could Safdie's proposal fulfill this mandate?

For Ram Karmi, arguably the most influential Israeli architect of the Israeli born (sabra) generation, who later became the head architect of the Ministry of Housing, the equivocal answer was yes. He supported the project spiritedly. "The Six Day War, [he explained] was a great act, no less than any other acts in the history of Jerusalem." If one "comes to Jerusalem with great spirit and full heart," then one should express it "from his inner self to the city's landscape." Karmi saw no reason to thin out the impact of the Israeli rule over Jerusalem. The latter should become an integrated part of the great historical lineage of "people who thought the message they had for Jerusalem was the most important message in its history." (Cassuto 1975: 95) The Zionist message of the return of Jews to their biblical homeland deserved, he contended, an architectural expression of no lesser magnitude than any other expression of strong rule over Jerusalem.

Karmi, an AA graduate and another postwar culture enthusiast, could reciprocate with the impressive inventory of contemporary debates Safdie brought to the Wall: His notion of monumentality was combined with hierarchical order, which helped him monumentalizing the vernacular. He insisted on returning to the essence of the traditional city, which "interweaves paths and public spaces, roots and arteries, habitations and institutions, all delicately juxtaposed, forming a continuum." (Safdie 1989: 28) Most important for Karmi was Safdie's insistence on creating an indisputable, clearly stated Israeli 'place'.

The secular Israeliness of this place offended Orthodox Jews, who opposed Safdie's attempt to incorporate their institutions into a secular world-view. David Cassuto went as far as claiming that if "dos" is a derogatory name for an Ultra Orthodox Jew, "dosnyland" is what Safdie proposed to construct. (Cassuto 1996)

For Shlomo Aronson, a co-author of the 1972 Planning Research, this 'place,' particularly the bulk of new terraced buildings, imposed itself on a landscape which was shaped throughout history. He was afraid that "the impressive modern buildings" would overpower the Wall. How could the latter be prioritized, he asked, "when you stand on the relatively narrow stage and look Westward instead of East!!" (Cassuto 1975: 90) Safdie's impressive import of postwar architectural culture, as well as his individualistic signature, enraged his critics. They thought it amounted to a timely rather than timeless expression for a site which lies beyond time.

Safdie's design attracted such criticism not only because he narrated the secular Zionist story exclusively, but arguably because he endeavored to embody fleeting, ambivalent, even contradictory notions into a clear-cut present vision and concrete design. For Safdie it was always both: both past and future, holy and urban, architecture and archeology, archaic and technological. In 1980 the Israel Museum asked Adolfo Natalini and David Palterer of Superstudio to propose alternative design for the Plaza. They chose an opposite approach. Instead of Safdie's 'both' they focused on the 'between', that which is 'neither' 'nor', yet accommodate both. In their view

> The open space [around Temple Mount] is a place between the holy and the secular, a place between past and future, between memory and hope, ruin and architectural design. The design is therefore about a zone that is both inside and outside space and time; an intersection of space, and interstice of time. We are working between spaces and between times. (Natalini and Palterer 1982: 27)

Interestingly, exactly because they recognized that "times are what they must be," they tried "to alter the duration of time" through design. If "times" are bounded periods, which occupy a particular space in our consciousness, beliefs, and collective memories, then the role of design was to find the fissures between them in order to suggest communication, even union.
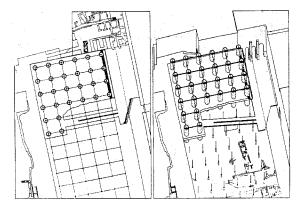

Fig. 6. Natalini and Palterer, Design proposal for the Western Wall Plaza, 1982.

Natalini and Palterer's work was grounded in ambivalence. It had to be therefore both mute and eloquent. Their modus operandi was a grid, which they overlaid over the entire precinct. The infinite linear web was lightly materialized only at its intersections, which turned into vertical indicators: a hybrid of a tree, a column and a sign. Near the Wall these indicators grew into perforated stone pillars, which carried the double platform, the lower one for prayer, the upper for ceremonies. Both hovered over the extended archeological zone underneath.

Why did Superstudio enact the grid, arguably the most persistent form in Modern art and architecture, in such dense site? Rosalind Krauss suggested that

> [T]he grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse...In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. (Krauss 1986: 9)

Or, one might add, on history. That is, for Superstudio the grid was primarily a strategy of silencing historical narratives and national zeal. It was an introverted process of turning design back onto itself. The grid was intentionally mute in face of the Wall's complex narration.

At the same time, however, the design was "a synchretic scheme, bringing together ages and places, demands, needs and desires. A project built around allegories and metaphors, with the stone both construction and sign, eloquent architecture, a diagram to decode" (Natalini and Palterer 1982: 24.) The strategic use of the grid might explain this seeming contradiction. Natalini and Palterer first employed the grid in order to nullify the time constraints of the site by alluding to a mute yet universal expression. Once their field of action was cleansed of immediate demands, they could choose, select, speak their story of in-betweens. They could alter between times, between faiths and hopes, because they relied on the autonomous power of design, on its capacity, through metaphors and allegories, to bespeak the unspeakable, the space between the layers of meaning.

"A design [they asserted] is always a condition of eternity." (Natalini and Palterer 1982: 27) On the one hand eternity is here contained in the realm of art, turning its back on the times which "are what they must be." On the other hand eternity is exactly what the narrative of this site is all about. Art was taken to be omnipotent; yet this projected potency alluded more to the universal than to the reverent.

Superstudio posed another yet different modernist challenge to Safdie's design. If Kutcher and Aronson as well as Fisher and Maestro focused on functional demands, than Superstudio accentuated the autonomy of "design". Both were strikingly different than the Israeli nation-building Modernism that Safdie criticized yet radicalized.

FUTURE

Before 1967 the leading national slogan promoted 'kidma ve'pituah', progress and development. Modern architecture was therefore the ultimate mold for the landscape of the nascent Jewish State. When postwar criticism agitated the local architectural community, some chose to challenge modernism on its own premise, to further radicalize it. Most successful in this respect were the morphologists. They looked for geometrical rules in natural forms, and advanced technologies with which to erect these forms artificially. They cherished the detailed analyses of D'Arcy Thompson's "On Growth and Form", and found in prefabricated technology means for execution.

Safdie was fascinated with Thompson since his apprentice in Kahn's office under the influence of Ann Ting. The use of prefabricated elements granted his Montreal Habitat much of its fame. This acclaimed project exhibited a genuine marriage of vernacular forms and high technology, a winning combination that Safdie brought to the Western Wall Plaza.
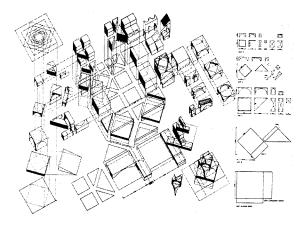

Fig. 7. Moshe Safdie, 'Architectural vocabulary'.

In order to create the theater he envisioned, he had to mediate between the strikingly different scales of the Jewish Quarter vernacular and the monumental measures of Temple Mount. Inspired by Thompson's analysis of shells, he generated a geometrical scheme of proportions, which was necessary also for the prefabricated construction method he proposed. The latter assured quick completion, which accorded with yet another Zionist myth of creating fast and irreversible "facts on the ground."

Shlomo Aronson's gracious yet bitter response was shared by many: "The beautiful slides that we've seen and the extraordinary model have something we somewhere were afraid of: we were afraid of a project; we were afraid of a "finished" project, which is made by the hand stroke of a single thought." (Cassuto 1975: 83)

FINAL WORDS

In 1972 the Ministry of Religious Affairs announced that "Every physical planning in the Western Wall precinct requires first a definition of the unique meaning of the Wall" (Kutcher and Aronson 1972.) Their Research Team considered first the sacredness of Jerusalem and Temple

Mount according to Jewish law (halachah), then Jewish traditions at the Wall. Archeology and history, as well as tourism and the stability of the Wall came after. Safdie's priorities were different. In his book *Jerusalem: The Future of the Past,* he stated that

> *The Wall is obviously much more than a place where Orthodox Jews worship... The Wall's meaning clearly extends beyond religion: it is the symbol of Judaism in every one of its facets — as a nation, a religion, a people, a culture (Safdie 89:107.)*

Note the priorities: nation before religion, both before people and their culture. Alternatively, Superstudio's design was motivated by "Memory, expectation and hope" (Natalini and Palterer 1982: 27,) that is, primarily by people, their cultures, their desires and fears.

In this paper I studied design propositions, which argued the above positions *architecturally*. They exploit the capacity of architecture to shape an environment in which ideological messages are communicated through bodily experience in space, through contemplation as well as distracted utilization, through vision as well as movement, touch, enclosure and light. Such architectural positionings are necessarily enacted through architectural schools of thought and building styles. What can we learn, than, from the architectural manifestations of the national and cultural positions I have discussed? If we look, for example, at the intriguing bond between Modernism and Orthodox Judaism — how could the most rational/materialist means accommodate the apex of religious faith? Or, if postwar architectural culture emphatically put "Man" and "community" at its center, how can one explain its intense compatibility with nationalist agendas? These examples suggest that the entanglement of architecture and politics might provoke new venues for the *criticism* of both.

* Work in progress. Thanks to Sibel Bozdogan and Iris Aravot for their helpful comments.

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