



## **Jerusalem: divisive urban planning at the heart of the Holy City**

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**Reviewed:** Irène Salenson, *Jérusalem : bâtir deux villes en une*, Paris, Éditions de l'Aube, 2014.

*How is the Israeli–Palestinian conflict reflected in the way the city of Jerusalem has been planned and developed? In this book, based on meticulous fieldwork, Irène Salenson reveals the various actors and the manifold complex and contradictory processes involved in this particularly conflictual urban-planning context.*

As a revised and abridged version of a PhD thesis defended in 2007, this work – “Jerusalem: Building Two Cities in One” – by geographer Irène Salenson is devoted to examining the contemporary challenges of urban planning in Jerusalem, and will provide a breath of fresh air for all dedicated observers of the Holy City. The author, while never excluding the political or geographical issues directly linked to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from her reasoning, refuses to accept them as the sole, definitive factors that explain the changes currently under way. By giving priority to bottom-up analyses on the ground, she reveals a more open, diverse and sometimes paradoxical web of factors that leaves readers feeling they have gained a better understanding of the complex nature of the strategies and interactions that today combine to make Jerusalem a city that is simultaneously highly unique (influence and importance of religious factors, orthodoxisation in the Israeli section of the city, demographics of resistance in the Palestinian section of the city, etc.) and highly banal (globalised urban planning, loss of vitality in the city centre, gentrification, etc.). As a result of long experience in the field in both West and East Jerusalem, and an awareness that readability and the (impossible) quest for neutrality are incompatible, Irène Salenson manoeuvres with dexterity between the two heuristic pitfalls that await any conscientious researcher working on Jerusalem: exceptionalism and trivialisation.

### **Observing Jerusalem “from the bottom up”**

In his preface to this work, Éric Verdeil evokes the memory of Michel Seurat, a field researcher who was always attentive to the discrepancies between discourse and practice, and between “development” ambitions and the social mobilisations that truly structure the urban fabric. This reference is especially deserving, not only because Irène Salenson’s thesis was supported by a grant bearing his name (the Michel Seurat Award), but also because, throughout the book, the author adopts a posture of doubt and questioning with regard to commonly held perceptions, and even a – salutary – dose of suspicion when it comes to the development-related discourses presented by the various actors (urban planners, politicians, etc.) she encountered. She always takes care to compare the overriding political actions (which she has investigated closely, on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides) with what she calls the “margins for alternative, autonomous or semi-autonomous action” available to residents themselves.

In doing so, she takes an approach diametrically opposed to the geopolitical analysis proposed in particular by Frédéric Encel, an omnipresent figure on the media and editorial scenes for almost 20 years. His work *Géopolitique de Jérusalem* (“Geopolitics of Jerusalem”) (1998) is limited to the abstract, disembodied analysis of an area seen simply as a theatre of operations, based essentially on the analysis of elements of discourse, without any concession to fieldwork. Irène Salenson, on the other hand, has chosen to build her expertise by working directly within institutions in charge of urban planning, on both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides of the city, as part of a truly participative approach to observation – a highly delicate, time-intensive and, in certain respects, dangerous approach, but one that has proved endlessly fruitful in terms of results. In particular, it has enabled her to identify, in great detail, the heterogeneity of the societies present in the city, their passiveness in some cases, and the forces of inertia, the focus on the domestic sphere and the “laissez-faire” attitudes that can be found across neighbourhoods or family units, and which account for the complexity of the trends observed. As a result of this approach, she has been able to determine the extent of the roles played by socio-economic factors, regulatory frameworks and neighbourhood action that is very often constructed in response to trivial demands and grievances. The case of the opposition to the Safdie Plan (eventually put on hold by the Israeli authorities in 2006) is, from this point of view, symptomatic of the well-known NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) syndrome identified by observers of urban development in every large city around the world today.

### **Authoritarian, multi-actor urban planning**

The structure of the book is a good illustration of Irène Salenson’s research trajectory, from the analysis of Israeli urban policy (Chapter 1) to the various reactions of Palestinian actors. The demographic framework is established from the outset: since the annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967, Israel has been fighting a losing battle in demographic terms. The population of Jerusalem – within the boundaries of the Israeli municipality – was around 75% Israeli in 1967, compared with 63% today and a projected 60% by 2020. These figures, often overlooked, show that the city of Jerusalem is in fact “unattractive” for a majority of Israelis in demographic and socio-economic terms, although it remains extremely highly regarded in political, religious and symbolic terms. The soaring orthodoxisation of the Israeli city, accompanied by the impoverishment of an ever greater proportion of the population (a third of households lived below the poverty line in 2011, compared with a fifth 20 years earlier), clearly shows that the tensions at play are not linked exclusively to external geopolitical factors but also reflect the internal contradictions of the different societies present.

In the face of the “demographic authoritarianism” deployed by the Israeli political authorities in an effort to maintain a declining Israeli majority, Palestinian inhabitants essentially have to put up with the consequences (Chapter 2). By carefully studying the procedures in place for the granting of building permits and the perimeters of different development plans under way in East Jerusalem, the conclusion drawn by Irène Salenson is one of a “spatial confinement of Palestinian development”. However, the direct and indirect causes she highlights are not necessarily those that would be expected, as in 2014 more than two thirds of building-permit applications filed by Palestinian residents were approved, according to figures provided by the municipality. In reality, it is rather the cost of the procedure and the overall regulatory framework that leads many Palestinian residents to sidestep this approach: for example, in East Jerusalem, most land-use coefficients defined by local development plans limit the maximum height of buildings to two floors, without exception, compared with four to eight floors in West Jerusalem. A form of circumvention has therefore been established on the Palestinian side, for both political and pragmatic reasons: people simply avoid filing building-permit applications because the regulatory framework does not correspond to the proposed projects. This policy of spatial confinement has produced predictable results in terms of real estate: in total, since 1967, one new apartment has been created for every 3 residents in the west of the city, compared with one for every 7.6 inhabitants in the east. In

addition to the housing issue, Irène Salenson underlines the shortage of public amenities in East Jerusalem – 8 post offices (compared with 42 in West Jerusalem), 4 public libraries (versus 36), 102 schools (versus 437) – all of which serves to accentuate the resentment felt in Arab neighbourhoods, which represent over 35% of the municipal population but only benefit from around 10% of the city budget.

The demolition of buildings erected without building permits is one of the most politically sensitive issues in Jerusalem and is tackled head-on by Irène Salenson, who estimates that almost half of the housing units built in East Jerusalem since 1967 were constructed without permission. In response to this reality, the Israeli authorities have responded with increasing severity since the 1990s, with the number of demolitions rising from 10 or 12 houses a year in the early 1990s to around 100 a year today; furthermore, in the case of these demolitions, the sanction applied is extremely severe for the owner, who loses the amount invested in the building and has to pay not just a large fine but also the demolition costs. This policy essentially serves as a deterrent, as Irène Salenson estimates that less than 10% of non-regulatory structures are ultimately destroyed at the end of the various procedures involved.

Regarding land confiscations, another sensitive issue, Irène Salenson reminds us that the Israeli expropriation law (of 1970) is based on a 1943 ordinance dating back to the British Mandate, and that it is clearly the notion of public interest (which should lie at the heart of any expropriation procedure) that is problematic in the case of Jerusalem, since almost all the new residents of settlements in the expropriated areas are Israeli Jews. Yet this socio-spatial segregation need not be explicitly established by regulatory means, as private developers usually have free rein to select or reject potential buyers at the time of purchase. In sum, this overview of Israeli urban planning shows that, in the context of a clearly defined political strategy, a multitude of diverse actors contribute to the desired outcome in reality: the housing ministry, the interior ministry (for the destruction of buildings erected in areas declared “not suitable for construction”), the municipality, the army, settlement movements (such as Elad in Silwan or Gush Emunim throughout the occupied West Bank), private developers, and so forth. Far from being a handicap, this diversity – with each actor mobilised in a particular territory or context – seems, on the contrary, to be one of the strengths of Israeli policy in Jerusalem.

### **Alternative or autonomous Palestinian planning?**

In view of the multifaceted power of Israeli urban planning, Irène Salenson examines the possibilities that exist for the development of an “alternative” or semi-autonomous Palestinian urban form of urban planning (Chapter 3). While the six “neighbourhood offices” in East Jerusalem (including Wadi Joz, At-Tur, Beit Safafa, Beit Hanina and Issawiya) are sometimes accused of direct collaboration with the occupying power, some NGOs, such as Bimkom (“instead of” in Hebrew), have chosen to develop alternative development plans based primarily on the wishes of residents. Yet, despite the undeniable professionalisation that makes this kind of association possible, there has been no lack of criticism regarding the “token deliberation” offered by this type of initiative. Irène Salenson points out that it is, in fact, a pragmatic approach that is chosen by most Palestinians in East Jerusalem, who are willing to go through municipal offices for services considered essential and “apolitical” (social and educational services, healthcare, sports and cultural activities), but refuse, wherever possible, their intervention in areas considered politically sensitive (real-estate and land issues in particular). In support of her argument, Irène Salenson cites Aude Signoles, who has demonstrated this same distinction between pragmatic short-term strategies and long-term ideological orientations.

The question of truly autonomous Palestinian urban planning occupies the last chapter of the book (Chapter 4). Because Jerusalem was excluded from the purview of the Palestinian Authority by the Oslo Accords (1994), such autonomy can only be developed on the margins. The first domain in which there is some room for manoeuvre is the preservation of architectural heritage,

especially following the designation of the Old City as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981, and also as a result of the fact that over two thirds of land ownership in the Old City is linked to Muslim pious foundations (*waqf*) that are in principle inalienable. A number of local Palestinian associations (such as Riwaq) and international organisations (such as the Welfare Association, based in Geneva), acting as NGOs, have been working to implement an “Old City revitalisation plan” with the aim of renovating housing and helping maintain Palestinian commercial activities, and not without a certain degree of success. Outside the Old City, the Palestinian Housing Council (PHC) is seeking to promote social-housing projects for Palestinian residents, even if these projects then have to be transferred to the Islamic *waqf* to ensure that the properties in question remain inalienable and indivisible. For, beyond the question of housing, it is the issue of land ownership that is problematic: Orient House (until its closure by Israel in 2001) and subsequently the Land Research Center have sought to create a Palestinian land register that can be operated independently of the Israeli registry. However, the stances of international donors (UN, UNDP, USAID, etc.), which tend, *de facto*, to comply with Israeli territorial strategies so as to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of their projects, mean that this attempt to achieve greater autonomy is still uncertain and fragile.

Ultimately, Irène Salenson leads her readers to question the relative influence of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on current developments, which are also linked to increased internal social tensions within both societies, and to the import of transnational models. In her conclusion, she stresses that, while the conflict occupies a central position in the city’s current urban dynamics, this centrality does not exclude other causalities: in a context of long-standing and asymmetrical conflict, actors’ strategies are often contradictory, variable, based on wait-and-see approaches, fatalistic, and even counterproductive, as if the complexity of the situation – and, above all, its unpredictability – were destined to lead to stalemate.

### **Bibliography**

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**Vincent Lemire**, born in Paris in 1973, holds the prestigious *Agrégé* teaching qualification in history (1998) and a PhD in contemporary history (2006), and is the author of *La Soif de Jérusalem. Essai d’hydrohistoire* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010) and *Jérusalem 1900. La ville sainte à l’âge des possibles* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013). He is currently a lecturer at the Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée and the director of the European ERC Open-Jerusalem (“Opening Jerusalem Archives: For a Connected History of ‘Citadinité’ in the Holy City (1840–1940)”) project.

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