

urban metamorphoses:

Discussing the need for perceptive and designed change
regarding the cultured landscape(s) of Tel Aviv-Yafo
(working title)



Paper 02 | 2012

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"Urban Metamorphoses"

June 22, 2012

The concept of space and place in modern western society

In the last two decades, space has become an increasingly important term in critical analysis; it is now an all-embracing category within an increasing number of interdisciplinary projects that one can group under the rubric of 'cultural studies'. Much of this work takes its inspiration from Henri Lefebvre's "*The Production of Space*" and its set of conceptual tools with which to discuss the social experience of the city. Space, in Lefebvre's viewpoint, is a discourse; it is neither given nor transcended – but "produced". He insists that "an already produced space can be decoded, can be read" in order to reveal the key drivers involved in its creation (Lefebvre 1991:17). Indeed, "every society ... produces a space, its own space" (ibid. 31). This process is both mutual and dialectical: Society produces spaces, and these very spaces produce society. Just as identity is not associated with language from the start, but is always produced and understood through language, space is never a given or static entity, but always the product of its usage.

Although relating to space in the modern period mainly, Lefebvre also writes about the "absolute space", a kind of leftover space that is often located in nature and associated with spiritual worship. For the purpose of the present research project, this "absolute space" – to the degree that it exists – may be understood as the biblical 'Land of Israel' (*Eretz Yisrael*), characterized by Jewish political autonomy and a largely agrarian lifestyle.

For analytical purposes, Lefebvre divides space into three categories (or modes of definition): 1. Spatial practices, 2. Representations of space, and 3. Spaces of representation (Lefebvre 1991:38f). The first category constitutes the economic base in the field of social sciences; its analysis requires an empirical observation of space and a description of its networks. This research project, however, primarily deals with the final two categories: 'Representations of space' includes architecture and anything else having an impact on the city's physical layout, and 'spaces of representation' cover the field of imagination – that is, all art. In the case of Tel Aviv-Yafo, these two last categories are especially intertwined: The city was imagined in various ways years before its establishment. Even during the relatively modest stages of its initial construction as a suburb of Jaffa, it was conceived as a fantastic center of Jewish cultural renewal (e. g. Theodor Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* ['Old New Land'], 1902).

Space is always an ideologically loaded concept. Yet, the idea of space as an abstract, even neutral, entity persists and can even be of methodological value, especially when contrasted to the concept of place. In his work "*Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*", Yi-Fu Tuan analyzes the difference between the two categories as follows: "'Space' is more abstract than 'place'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 1977:6).

This concept of space as a universal pre-existing condition to which the characteristics of place are "added" – in the form of signs, culture, custom, and built structures – has historically been the normative view in Western culture. Tuan describes a process during which familiarity is taught and acquired (ibid. 73). Except in religious or transcendental views, this process is neither predetermined nor theologically driven. Both Lefebvre and Tuan view space as fabricated, as inevitably a product of 'something' – whether that 'something' is ideology, historical forces, social functions, or else. Both essentially argue that space is not a '*tabula rasa*', an emptiness onto which the characteristics of place are imposed. In this sense, both approaches would highly contrast the concept of space as an emptiness being typical for early Zionist belief which imagined the Land of Israel as "a land without a people for a people without a land" (Mann 2006: 4). Both approaches also treat space as the product of social experience – whether that sociability is constituted by a family, a tribe, a city, or a nation. The conceptual frames of both Lefebvre and Tuan can help to understand how Tel Aviv sought to become – and was gradually perceived as – a Jewish urban space.

The concept of space and place in Judaism

The Jewish people have always had a unique concept of both landscape and geography. Until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews saw themselves for the most part as temporary exiles in other people's countries as they were exiled from the Land of Israel by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. Their cultural belief was that God had played a role in their exile, and therefore God would eventually bring them back. Being exiled, the Jewish people used to live as a minority group with few political or civil rights among local populations in places like Egypt, Europe, and Asia, where they often faced anti-Jewish violence.

For Jews around the world, the idea of exile, diaspora and return became a central vision of their self-understanding, and they used the motif of exile and punishment, implied with redemption and return, as a way to find a greater meaning and comfort in the diaspora. The ways that Jews rooted themselves in foreign countries – at least up until the 20th century – were manifold and included, to differing degrees: adapting local tongues while maintaining Hebrew as the holy language and developing Jewish languages for daily uses; following local laws as well as Jewish religion and lifestyle; interacting with Christian or Arab neighbors but generally discouraging intermarriage; adapting the local cuisine while keeping it kosher; seeing their spiritual home as the Land of Israel; and teaching their children a deep love for Judaism and Jewish culture (Garrett 2003:108f). Contemporary Jews who come from this tradition relate to landscape and geography in multiple ways:

For Zionist Jews and those who support a Jewish homeland regardless of where they currently live, the establishment of Israel in 1948 means that the diaspora is over and that the Jews have returned home. For ultra-orthodox Jews, in contrast, it will only be over once the Messiah comes and leads all the Jews back to the Land of Israel. For other Jews, the land where they live now is their ‘home’, and the diaspora is only a cultural concept based in Judaism. Whether or not Jews are Zionists, ultra-orthodox or secular, the idea of ‘home’ and ‘diaspora’ has given them unique concepts of landscape and geography, of place and space. For most Jews before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, life was conducted on a dual terrain: the real space where one lived in the present, and the biblical Land of Israel (*‘Eretz Yisrael’*). Some of the questions this brings up are as follows:

- Where and what did constitute home – one’s present home or the place of return to the Land of Israel?
- How does the imagined landscape of *Eretz Yisrael* relate to the real world the Jews are living in?
- How does the Jewish landscape concept contrast with non-Jewish models?

This dual positioning meant that concepts of landscape, geography, home, away, the road, public and private, were understood in a different way than for non-Jews. For example, for many non-Jews, ‘home’ means where one lives now – may it be in Europe, America or Asia – and ‘away’ means at university, on holiday, at a neighbor’s house. For the Jewish people until the 20th century – and for many to the present day – ‘home’ means both: where one lives now AND the imagined place of the Land of Israel, while ‘away’ can mean away from one’s house or away from the Land of Israel. This Jewish concept of landscape is best expressed by the poet Judah Halevi (1080-1142) who wrote: “In the East is my heart, and I dwell at the end of the West.”

Indeed, Jewish literature is a central place to examine the Jewish concept of landscape as for the Jews who often saw themselves and were treated as temporary residents in others’ lands books have always played an extremely large role in the culture (e.g. the Ten Commandments, the Talmud, scripts of famous Rabbis).

In literature, geography is a construct, and locations are described according to the authors’ imaginations and personal viewpoints. When we consider the landscapes of literature, it is very important to be aware of the way that power structures affect the author and the people the author describes. Instead of common European assuming that public spaces are unrestricted areas and that the landscape is equally free for all to partake of, we should remember that for many groups the lands they live in and move through are neither safe nor free. Travel for Jewish people in Eastern Europe during the 18th century, for instance, tended to be more a matter of economic gain or forced migrations than a free, positive choice of tourism, adventure, or science. Because of this altered concept of movement, the landscape becomes not one’s large homeland (*‘Heimat’*), but instead a space one must pass over out of necessity.

To interpret the Jewish concepts of landscape and geography, the imagined terrain of ‘exile’ and ‘return’ must be sketched; a European map must be replaced by a Jewish one in which both exile and the Land of Israel are ‘home’, although one is the physical home, and the other one the spiritual home. For some, this dual concept continues to the present day, as in Simon Schama’s *“Landscape and Memory”*, where he recollects the following scene:

“I remembered someone in a Cambridge common room pestering the self-designated ‘non-Jewish Jew’ and Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher, himself a native of this country [Lithuania], about his roots. ‘Trees have roots’, he shot back, scornfully, ‘Jews have legs.’” (Schama 1996: 29)

This is a vision of rootlessness, of having either no home – or having a dual home. Any conceptual mapping of Jewish literary consciousness up to 1948 must thus include a rendering where ‘away’ means both: being away from one’s house or family and away from Eretz Yisrael:

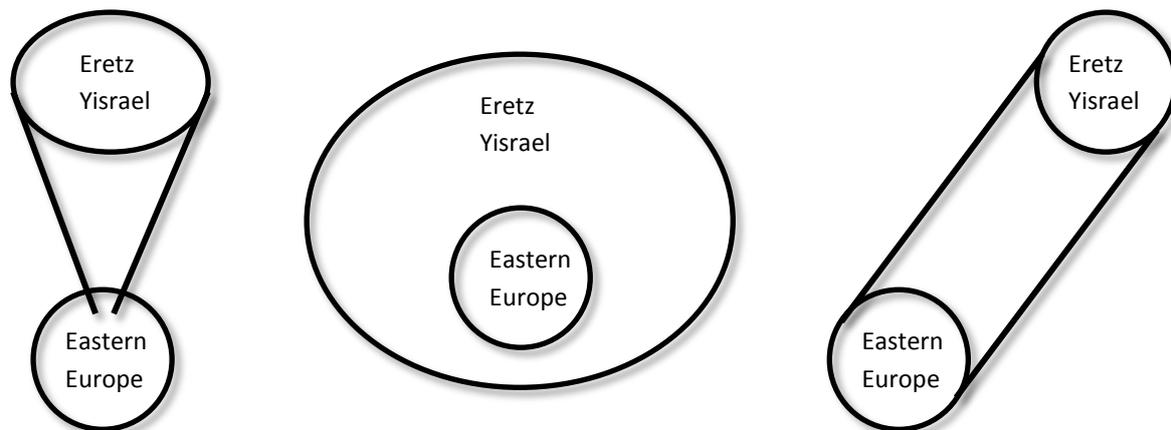


Figure 1.1: Jewish cultural visions of space, original by Leah Garrett (2003)

In the map on the left, Eretz Yisrael is a large shadow over daily life in the diaspora, e.g. Eastern Europe. In the map in the middle, life in diaspora is paralleled by life in Eretz Yisrael, but on much larger scale. And in the map on the right, the two spheres of Eretz Yisrael and the Jewish diaspora exist at the same time but in different locations.

While the idea of ‘home’ and ‘away’ changed with the establishment of Israel in 1948 when many Jewish Zionists made Israel their home, the event that most radically altered the Jewish concept of landscape was the Holocaust. By 1945, with the murder of six million Jewish women, men, and children, and the destruction of the shtetls all over Eastern Europe, ‘home’ and ‘away’ took on radically different forms as demonstrated in the poem “Jewish travel: Change is God and Death is His Prophet” by the Hebrew writer Yehuda Amichai:

Yehuda Halevi wrote: ‘In the East is my heart, and I dwell at the end of the West.’
 That’s Jewish travel, that’s the Jewish game of hearts between east and west,
 between self and heart, to and fro, to without fro, fro without to, fugitive
 and vagabond without sin. And endless journey, like the trip Freud the Jew took,
 wandering between body and mind, between mind and mind, only to die between the two.
 Oh, what a world this is, where the heart is in one place and the body
 in another (almost like a heart torn from a body and transplanted).
 I think about people who are named for a place where they have never been and will never be.
 Or about an artist who draws a man’s face from a photograph because the man is gone.
 Or about the migration of Jews, who do not follow summer and winter, life and death as birds do,
 but instead obey the longings of the heart. That’s why they are so dead,
 and why they call their God *Makom*, ‘Place’. And now that they have returned to their place,
 the Lord has taken up wandering to different places, and His name will no longer be Place
 but Places, Lord of the Places. Even the resurrection of the dead is a long journey.
 What remains? The suitcases on top of the closet, that’s what remains. (Amichai 2000:117-18)

Amichai first presents the Jewish landscape as described earlier, where the Jews in the diaspora live in one land, while yearning for another. He then shifts the poem to describe the Jewish landscape in a post-Holocaust, post-Zionist world where the binary of ‘real’ Europe and ‘mythic’ Eretz Yisrael shifts: Before the Holocaust, as discussed earlier, ‘real’ Europe exists simultaneously with the imagined homeland of Jewish longing; after the Holocaust, as the poem documents, Europe becomes the mythic space, the landscape of remembrances populated by the ghosts of the murdered. The ‘suitcases on top of the closet’ are all that remain when the Jews of Europe are dead. Now Israel becomes the ‘real’ land of wars, schools and living nationalism, while Europe is the place of ghosts of the once living, and a place of remembrances and grief.

Nowadays, 'home' for many Jews is either Israel, where they feel they have returned, or places such as Britain and the United States. Many Jews consider these places a diaspora while they hope to return eventually to the Land of Israel, while others believe these places are their permanent home.

The special connotations of 'place' in Jewish tradition further complicate the relation between space and place. Within classical Jewish sources, the Hebrew word for place ('*makom*') is often considered a synonym for God (e.g. Auerbach 1978; Hirshfeld 2002), it signifies the closeness between God and the Jewish people, and it usually refers to an all-encompassing space. Clearly, this notion of God as the ultimate space is compromised if space is always socially produced according to Lefebvre: How can God ever be described or created by human design? God's transcendence is potentially undone by the concept of space as a social production. Yet Zionism, a movement of national redemption and rehabilitation, originates directly – though not without difficulty – from this paradoxical mix of transcendence with social experience. Zionism's largely secular driving force exploited the Jewish cultural connection to the 'Land of Israel'. This ancient attachment, however, existed mainly on the level of the word – the "homeland of the text" (Steiner 1998:304-27). Part of Zionism's task in 'imagining' a national tradition was creating a place to house that tradition and to locate its collective, ritual sites. Thus, the creation of a new Jewish city and a state may have depended on the land's qualities as an ancient Jewish homeland – however, in the modern context, the space had to be (re)produced.

Conclusion

The Jewish concept of space and place has been influenced to a large degree by the notion of 'diaspora' and 'home'. Nowadays, more than seven million Jews live in Israel, and the ideal of Jewish space is confronted with a constant and daily struggle. The rhetoric of Zionism often intermingles with the old dreams of the Land of Israel, making many religious Israelis reluctant to return any of the land 'of the Bible' to the Palestinians. For Israeli Jews, the ideal meets the reality when the landscape takes on both aspects: a space documented in the Bible and the 'Jewish modern nation'.

In the last half century or so, Jews throughout the world have altered their concepts of space, land, home and away, as deep roots have been established both in the diaspora and in Israel. Jews as a whole have become less religious, more secular and more interested in embracing the surrounding culture, and after the Holocaust many nations have become more accepting of them. In Israel, the creation of a 'Jewish nation' has brought attempts to the forefront to teach Israeli Jews to have deep ties to a nation that is still extremely young. In America, Britain and other places, where there has been a decline in Jewish marginalization, deep roots have been established as well, although often with some residual insecurity about how accepted the Jewish people really are. This new 'rootlessness' in both Israel and the diaspora has changed Jewish landscapes as the surrounding world has become a place many Jews seek to claim as their own.

In a certain sense, the imagining and construction of Tel Aviv was an attempt to secularize space, to make what had been the biblical 'Land of Israel' into an actual place, a place with the attributes of 'home'. This gap or tension, between the biblical story about 'Place' (*makom*) and the place itself, and between space as transcendent and space as socially produced – backed up the creation of modern Jewish culture and the production of Jewish urban space in Palestine. Loyalty to the place itself, in contrary to its historical or narrative dimension – a duality that Zali Gurevitch has called "the double site of Israel" (Gurevitch 1997:205; Gurevitch and Aran 1991:9-44) – is also a rejection of the theological dimension of 'place'. Aesthetic representation of Tel Aviv is thus at the same time blasphemy and a reconfiguration of what sacred place could be (Ezrahi 2000; Schwartz 2000).

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