The Peres Center for Peace - An Aesthetic Occupation\*

\*A term coined by Daniel Bertand Monk

**What went wrong when architecture was challenged to create a centre for promoting peace in Tel Aviv Jaffa?**

by

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See previous email for part 1

The Peace Center project is located at the end of a promenade that originates in the northern rich neighborhood of Tzukei Aviv and terminates in the south in Jaffa’s al-Ajami neighbourhood – one of the city’s poorest. It is the same al-Ajami, where Palestinians who did no flee Jaffa after the 1948 War were concentrated and subjected to military law. The building does not embody or reflect these historical events, nor its physical context.

During the last century one can see the changing relationship between the two cities- Jaffa and Tel Aviv; from Tel-Aviv being a suburb of Jaffa, to Jaffa being a neglected suburb of Tel-Aviv.

In 1918 Tel-Aviv had 5,400 inhabitants (100% Jews), Jaffa had 65,000 inhabitants (87% Arabs, 12% Jews).

Today more than 400,000 people live in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa; only 4% of them are Palestinians. Jaffa was the largest Arab city in Palestine before 1948. It was known as a port-city with its large oranges industry.

Today, ‘Jaffa oranges’ is internationally known as an Israeli brand.

After the 1948 war only 4,000 out of 71,000 Palestinians remained in Jaffa. The others were driven out and many of them moved to Gaza as refugees. The journey that started with the Palestinian refugees’ ship ended at the shore of Gaza; with few belongings, not knowing if they would ever see their homes and their land again. Their grandchildren are the same people who suffered the last war’s destruction in Gaza.

~~After the ‘48 war the Palestinians that were left in Jaffa were concentrated in al-Ajami and were subjected to military law. Wire fences were constructed to mark the border of the Palestinians’ living area; a border they could not cross.~~

The Palestinians who were limited to live in al-Ajami had their movements severely restricted until 1966. Decades later, for completely different reasons, we can find another gated-community in Jaffa, the infamous project called ‘Andromeda Hill’. This luxurious complex, inhabited by wealthy Jewish residents, was surgically implanted in an environment that didn’t want it in the first place. The destruction and years of neglect on one hand versus the enticing real estate close to Mediterranean beach on the other hand, made al- Ajami a perfect site for greedy investors.

The city that has suffered omission and neglect, faces today another kind of occupation called gentrification, which pushes many of its inhabitants aside. The elimination of Palestinian presence from the urban landscape continues.

The Peres Center for Peace’s ravishing building looks as if it has been surgically implanted in an environment that didn’t want it in the first place. The layers of greenish concrete, of which the building is constructed, symbolizes "the historical layers of this place", as the Architect declared, but the structure totally ignores the complexity of layers that are represented in this urban context: the Muslim cemetery on the southern side, the mosque to the northeast and the poor houses of al-Ajami on the east that are facing the glitzy real-estate projects; for Jews only.

The real estate entrepreneurs have identified the consumer potential of the site, located on a hillside facing the Mediterranean sea, and the gentrification process is now at its peak. And if that is not enough, over the past couple of years, the Tel Aviv municipality has issued hundreds of demolition and eviction orders to local residents. For every vacant plot there are dozens of buyers. "The gentrification process would have happened – whether we were here or not… the Arabs are being pushed out of Jaffa anyway; at the end of the day the development forces are much stronger than 'do-gooders' like me," remarks the former director general of the Center.

The Center dedicated to education and the promotion of peace, reconciliation and cooperation between nations demonstrates an outrageous degree of insensitivity. The Center has become a willing accomplice to the gentrification process of Jaffa in general and al-Ajami in particular, a process that is actively elbowing aside Arab residents of low socio-economic status. In light of the current tensions in Jaffa, in particular, and in the region in general, the Peres Center conveys arrogance and impermeableness; the building turns its back to al-Ajami; literally and symbolically. The building is windowless and blocked off from its surroundings. Its back lies to the east and to Jaffa; its front, the entrance to the building, faces to the west and the sea. It seems to hint that the chances for peace lie in the west, beyond the sea, and not in the east, that is to say, not in the building's actual human, cultural and political context.

In doing so, the Peres Center for Peace reflects the Zionist aspiration to be accepted as modernist and western, euro-centric movement while denying the Orient. It uses exactly the same calculated tactics of "erasure and re-inscription", as James Holston termed the guiding force behind modernist planning and aesthetics – this force still constitutes a major theme in the planning and architecture of Tel Aviv-Yafo.

The founding of Tel Aviv, "The First Hebrew City", springs from the Zionist dream, as well as modernist concepts of utopia. It has denied the idea of the Diaspora and its Jews and also that of Jaffa and its oriental Arabs. Tel Aviv, the city that 'rose from the white sand' is essential to the modernist Zionist narrative of the ‘New Jew’ flourishing on the barren land. The white sands symbolize a "tabula rasa" – where there is no past, no history, no local architecture or urban references to interfere with the modern utopia.

The story of Tel Aviv as a modernist city is simultaneously a story of construction and creation and a story of destruction, deletion and oblivion. While Tel Aviv built itself, Jaffa has been destroyed, and still is being destroyed. The city that suffered omission and neglect faces today another kind of occupation called gentrification, which pushes many of its inhabitants aside, the Arab community is going through another kind of fragmentation. This process represents a renewed conflict over land, this time not for reasons of state but because of market forces and the supremacy of private over national interests.

The site of the Peres Center for Peace encapsulates this process. The Center was built on what used to be the Donolo Hospital which was founded during the British Mandate and became an important intersection in the communal life of Arab and Jews in Jaffa. Here, Arab and Jewish doctors, nurses and patients worked together side by side realizing a true coexistence between both peoples.

The hospital, however, was torn down in the 1980s and the area became once again a "tabula rasa", a landscape of white sands, a site for realizing the next utopian dream. With the destruction of the structure, there was no possibility of turning the hospital into a public building to be used by the local community. The land was neglected, awaiting gentrification. Sadly the Peres Center for Peace has become a willing accomplice to the gentrification process. Its architecture, a living epitome of the aesthetics of erasure, realizes the colonialist fantasy of occupying the oriental space. The aesthetic architecture of the building has become an agent of the aesthetic occupation of Jaffa and its urban space.

In 2000, Massimiliano Fuksas curated the Venice Architecture Biennale, entitled "Less Aesthetics, More Ethics." He then presented for the first time the Peres Peace Center project. At the time, he said: "The Peres Center for Peace was designed to shed some light on the main principle of architecture that is Ethics... Architecture cannot stand solely on aesthetics, but must develop a sense of responsibility, and distinguish between good and bad..."

Mr. Fuksas, we couldn’t agree more.

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