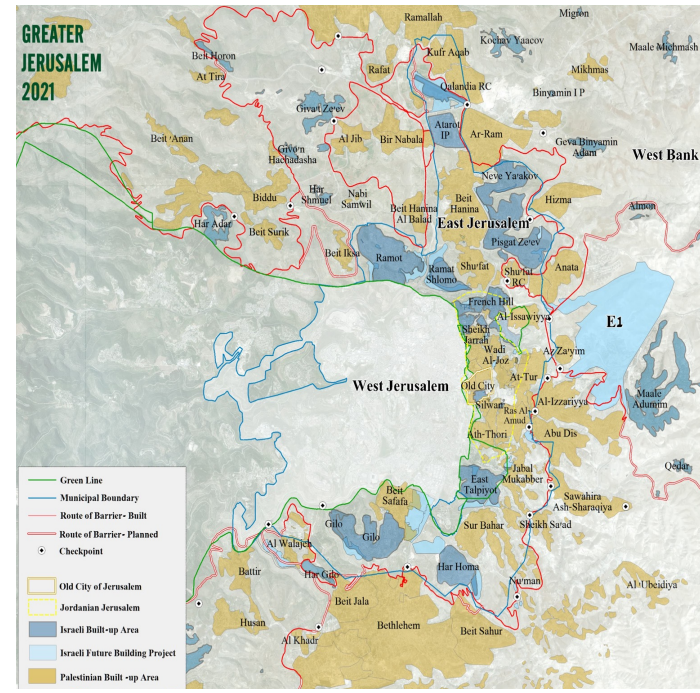


Art and Identity: Sovereignty in Public Spaces in Jerusalem

Jenna Kaplan¹ and Kamran Rastegar²

¹Tufts University School of Arts and Sciences, Class of 2024, ²Tufts University School of Arts and Sciences, Professor of International Literary and Cultural Studies

Background



Jerusalem is a contested city. Two nations claim it as their capital and Israeli law, international law, and Israeli wall-construction set three different boundaries for its expanse. “Facts on the ground” provide a new perspective to these ever-changing legal realities as communities compete for de facto sovereignty over land, even when legal sovereignty cannot be or is not established. Using of public art, art created and intended for unrestricted and free public access, artists work to change these realities and, in the process, influence the identities of their communities.

Research Objectives

This research seeks to identify the spatiality and common symbols and themes present across the city of Jerusalem, particularly in areas that are contested on multiple planes such as annexed areas of East Jerusalem with significant Jewish population. This phase of research pursues a case study-based approach rather than a statistical approach, will be pursued in a later phase, to observe what public art looks like in these spaces and who is making it. A related research objective is to adequately gather relevant context to each of these pieces relating to each work’s placement, location, materiality, translation (if relevant), and background.

Methods

This research is pursued through a combination of field research, which consisted of photographing works of public art and their surroundings as well as visiting artist collaboratives, and remote primary and secondary source-based research. Secondary sources used include journals, books, news sources, and websites focused on analyzing Israeli and Palestinian art trends. Remote primary sources include government and project and artist collaboratives’ websites, and artists’ blogs.



Case Study: On the Walls

Projected onto the walls of the Old City, this light show commemorates “Jerusalem Day 2022,” the 55th anniversary of the “reunification” of Jerusalem in 1967. Using the Hebrew language and the Israeli flag, this municipality project clearly asserts Jewish Israeli sovereignty onto the hottest of the contested spaces: the Old City.



Case Study: Within the Walls



“I Witness Silwan” is an international collaborative-supported art project. Painting the eyes of activists, leaders, and workers onto houses in the contested East Jerusalem neighborhood, the project seeks to promote Palestinian sovereignty and promote national consciousness through art.



Case Study: Beyond the Walls

This work is located within the municipality of Jerusalem, between Kafr Aqab and Qalandiya Refugee Camp, but beyond the separation wall known as the “Jerusalem envelope” built between 2003-2008. The first thing one sees after exiting the Qalandiya checkpoint, the work stretches the length of the road and includes scenes from the Palestinian national story and homages to folk art and traditions, scenes that express a pastoral yet active resistance.



Results

- Jerusalem plays a central, visible, and vital role in the national stories that are promoted by most organizations in the study. Imagery of the city, whether direct representations of or homages to its image, were common.
- Most art funded by or promoted by the municipality lacked the explicitly political nature of the art funded by individuals, collective, or non-profits. Municipality-funded art’s messages were subtle and promoted as a part of commemorations or other stories, such as the case study to the left.
- Common symbols and themes: | Palestinian and international: folk figures, Dome of the Rock, birds, Handala, Arabic language, Keffiyeh, martyrs/individuals killed | Israeli: biblical figures, pop culture icons, religious spirituality, menorah and religious symbols | General: Jerusalem’s old city, historical events, separation

Limitations

- All research was conducted between May and August 2022, and only works of public art that was present at this time were included in the study. While many major and permanent or semi-permanent works were included in this research, public art is ever-changing, and this research represents only a case study rather than a comprehensive exploration of all public art in Jerusalem.
- Art is an inherently subjective and the meanings that one sees and/or attributes meaning to are reflective of research biases. This research reflects the researcher’s knowledge, experience, and perception biases.

Conclusions

- Public art is employed by many stakeholder parties in the contestation of Jerusalem as a way to establish de facto sovereignty over areas or challenge that. Israeli municipality-funded art is more likely to seek to affirm legal realities.
- Art not funded by the municipality, whether by Palestinian, international, or Jewish artists, is more likely to challenge legal realities or express experiences or ideas related to areas of identity not connected to contestation.
- The more contested the area, the more instances of non-municipality-funded art.
- While public art generally expresses the identity, as demonstrated by polling and voting records, of those in its vicinity, this research could not establish whether this art influences or simply reflects this identity as a facet of the public space.