

Jerusalem Ruined By Architecture

Zvi Hecker, June 1987

Jerusalem, a treasured symbol of many faiths, is a site of unique beauty, preserved in times of peace and restored after every war and disaster. Nonetheless, over the past several decades, Jerusalem has been systematically ruined. It has been ruined not by neglect or natural catastrophe, but by a short-sighted official policy which uses its unchecked power to promote commercial interests and political ambitions.

The unique beauty of Jerusalem stems from the relationship between its landscape and the delicate fabric of the structures built upon it. One could say that the architecture of Jerusalem is no more than a kind of large ornament, harmoniously enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. One doesn't have to be an architect to sense the pattern of the buildings following the hillside topography and blending unobtrusively with the trees and the landscape. Unfortunately, it is none other than architects themselves who are today unscrupulously ruining the beauty of Jerusalem via profit-oriented commercial architecture.

Architecture has never been a purely commercial undertaking that secures a generous profit on a short-term investment. While it operates through economics, it represents a sort of mega-economy which brings more than conventional capital gains: there was hardly a better investment than that of the Medici in art and architecture in Florence; its citizens enjoy a very high return on that long term investment right up until the present day. There is ample to demonstrate that great architecture pays handsome dividends - in due time. In Australia, for instance, a great architect single-handedly brought to appearance the cultural aspirations of an entire continent in a single masterpiece.

The role of the architect is to mold the world of matter, creating environments, which preserve the spiritual link between the legacy of the past and the realities of the present day.

This objective is of little interest to land speculators and their architects. They prefer to ignore the significance of the past and the intrinsic value of accumulated tradition.

In Jerusalem today, any monstrosity that is faced with so called Jerusalem stone'' complies with the ``obligation to preserve the traditional character of the city''. But it is the physical size, the harmonious scale of the building mass, rather than their texture that makes a new building blend into its context or stand out aggressively. There is no place in Jerusalem for huge developments or building masses that are out of scale, whether in stone or stucco. Unfortunately, in recent years even larger and more vulgar forms have sprung up, which threaten the architectural unity of the city.

The old and the new are not necessarily contradictory elements, but can rather be complementary contributions of different ages. What begins as a novel idea and a radical innovation becomes, in time, absorbed into the main stream of tradition. Tradition must constantly be renewed by ever new manifestations of creativity; to prevent its erosion by parasitic forces. Unfortunately, such forces, arrogant, and uncreative, have been given a free hand in Jerusalem.

Over the years outstanding architects, such as Mendelsohn, Kaufman, Krakauer and Rau, labored to preserve and enrich the unique character of Jerusalem. Today many of their buildings, representing the cultural records of recent Jewish history in the Holy Land have been architecturally ruined by additions and alterations that have been made with the tacit consent of the Municipality of Jerusalem.

One must exhibit extreme restraint in deciding where to build and where to leave intact the primordial beauty of the landscape and the vernacular architecture. The crucial consideration in Jerusalem must be its beauty - the grace of its rolling hills, its vegetation and the landscape of its sky. We must perceive Jerusalem not as yet another city, but as an architectural phenomenon unique on the face of the earth.

I am convinced that Jerusalem should not have been proclaimed the capital of Israel, or of any other country, remaining no ones property but rather the spiritual capital of the entire world. There is no basis for unrestrained ambitions to make Jerusalem artificially large; it can never become physically as great as its immortal soul.

Throughout history, Jerusalem has always been one of the most important cities in the world, despite the fact that it was always small, defenseless, and short in the supply of water. The true strength of Jerusalem and its real shield has been its unique beauty.