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Commentary

The Aleph—Jerusalem as critical learning

Oren Yiftachel

This reflective paper offers the metaphor of ‘Aleph’—the ‘place of all places’—as well as the material city of Jerusalem, as points of departure for rethinking critical urban theories. In the paper, Jerusalem is ‘prized open’ as a site of learning—exposing the diversity of structural forces shaping this—and any other—city. The ‘Aleph approach’ draws attention to the relational and often changing nature in which structural forces interact as they produce urban space and society. This is highlighted by a ‘guided tour’ of Jerusalem that reveals an array of colonial, capitalist, religious, gendered and political forces of domination and their fluctuations through time and place. As such, the paper offers a ‘South-Eastern’ perspective, framed by ‘dynamic structuralism’ as foundation for new and engaged CUTs—critical urban theories. Such theories, it is suggested, should be informed by the multiple and uneven nature of oppression and resistance, and by new concepts and categories that emerge from the analysis, without treating the city as simply ‘chaotic’ or ‘self-organized’. Urban theory should move beyond the numbing theoretical dominance of ‘globalizing’ or ‘neoliberal’ capitalism, and deal seriously with simultaneous forces, movements, agents and politics that co-produce the nature of contemporary urbanism.

Key words: Jerusalem, urban colonialism, dynamic structuralism, Palestine, Israel, grey space

‘It’s in the cellar, under the dining room [...]
it’s mine—mine. I discovered it when I was a child [...]
I stumbled and fell, when I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph [...]
down in the cellar [...] the point in space that contains all other points [...] Yes, the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion [...]

Jorre Borghes’ ‘Aleph’ is a masterpiece of a short story, delving into the meanings and power of home, love, money, place and the threat of imminent destruction, through which a magical spot is imagined, found and eventually lost. This spot is ‘the Aleph’, named after the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with close resemblance to the Arabic ‘Aliph’ or the Greek ‘Alpha’. For Borghes the Aleph is the only location from which the ability to see, feel and hear the city and beyond reaches its ultimate climax. The Aleph is the vista point from which every little detail about the world can be seen—‘the place of all places’.

Following Borghes, and as a reflective epilogue to the diverse set of papers in this special feature, this paper seeks to ‘translate’ the mystical Aleph to more earthy realms of urban studies. Aleph provides a prism through which Jerusalem can be studied as the ‘place of all places’, and in turn suggests itself as a crucible for the broader study of contemporary urbanism. More specifically, Aleph is offered here as an epistemological inspiration for a revised critical approach of the urban, for which Jerusalem serves as an
omnipotent emblem—the example of examples.

Through highlighting some of the intense forces working in and on Jerusalem, I wish to lay conceptual grounds for what I provisionally term—an ‘Aleph approach’. That is, utilizing a focused and grounded gaze on Jerusalem as illuminating a (new) way of learning—an epistemology—and a foundation from which new CUTs (critical urban theories) can emerge. The point is not to present Jerusalem as a universal model, in the manner in which Chicago and later Los Angeles were presented in American-centered urban studies. The purpose is rather to take the intense and multifaceted nature of urban Jerusalem as a window through which to fathom the relational nature of urban forces; the possibility for the rise of new forces, categories and concepts; and the potential transformation in the way these forces ‘produce’ urban regions over time.

Hence, a central point advanced here is that learning Jerusalem openly and critically offers an opportunity to reflexively re-learn critical learning itself, thereby enriching the field of urban studies. Due to its conceptual nature, the paper will use scholarly referencing only when it refers to the battle of ideas in urban studies, and not a detailed review of Jerusalem studies which are aptly covered by the likes of Allegra, Casaglia, and Rokem (2012), Dumper (2014), Khalidi (2010) and Yacobi and Pullan (2014).

The five papers in this special feature are at once rich and important, while illustrating the need for a new approach. They present a diverse set of issues, forces and struggles existing at today’s Jerusalem. The important point, however, is that each paper analyzes a central urban phenomenon, with clear structural causes and implications. Yet, there is no way to bring these papers into a single organizing theoretical framework, nor understand them as part of the same urban logic. Hila Zaban shows in the first paper the ways in which gentrification has replaced planned immigrant settlement in a previously peripheral neighborhood; Oren Shlomo moves in the second to an entirely different discussion—the imposition of sovereignty—hotly contested in the city’s colonized Palestinian parts. The third paper by Amina Nolte takes a different angle by analyzing the impact of new transport infrastructure on the politics and development of divided urban space. In the fourth paper, Camillo Boano deals with the philosophy of urban design, by exploring the tension between Agambenian sanctity and profanation in the management of what some regard as the global holiest city. Finally, Jonathan Rokem shows how processes evident in Jerusalem also surface in more ‘normal’ cities such as Stockholm, making a case for comparative urban methodology.

Learning the nature of cities

I place my conceptual comment in relation to a series of recent debates regarding the desired direction of urban studies as a field of inquiry. These have advanced a series of sweeping claims attempting to either promote one Marxian paradigm over all others in understanding the ‘real nature of cities’ (Harvey 2008; Scott and Storper 2014); or alternatively announce no less than ‘the end of urban studies’, in the name of an all-inclusive putative process of ‘planetary urbanism’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015). These claims—insightful and challenging as they are—appear to echo the remnants of the ‘old CUT’—the uni-dimensional attempt of traditional critical theories to explain society by one coherent framework—a theory of everything—which would dominate all other theoretical approaches. In recent critical theories, global capitalism and putatively all-encompassing ‘neoliberalism’ have assumed such a status.

This uni-dimensional approach is not limited to neo-Marxian analysts. Liberal, statist, feminist, Foucauldian and procedural theories, to name but a few, have often claimed an all-inclusive narrative, within
which all other phenomena, not fitting their well-crafted view of city, policy and society, are relegated to ‘noise’ in the system (for reviews, see Robinson 2006; Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011; Roy 2011; Marcuse and Imbroscio 2014; Parnell and Oldfield 2014). The main issue with these approaches has not been the well-appreciated depth or wisdom of their insights, nor the high levels of the scholarship, but rather the Universalist claims which have often silenced other logics and writings on urban development, politics and transformations.

These grand claims appear to gloss over a central theoretical point: there cannot, and should not, be one ‘correct’ perspective with which to analyze the nature of urban regions. As shown below in the case of Jerusalem, powerful colonial, capitalist, religious, national, gender and military forces—and many sites of resistance—have co-shaped the city. These and other forces have fluctuated in the levels of dominance over time, while negotiating tensions, contradictions and compatibilities in producing urban society. Yet, the multiplicity of forces does not mean the city is simply ‘postmodern’, chaotic or uncontrollable, as it is clearly shaped by conspicuous powers and institutions. The ‘Aleph epistemology’ offers a way out of the claims and counter claims, by suggesting the concept of ‘dynamic structuralism’, in which several central forces are identified as most powerful for a particular place and time, although these are neither stable nor perpetual.

There appears to be a geography of power to the politics of knowledge—the universalizing critical claims have most often emerged from North-Western scholars, working at North American or European institutions, and representing Western thinking. The Aleph approach, with its mystical origins in ancient Hebrew, and emergence from Latin South America, as well as its multiple and contradictory imageries, offers a ‘South-Eastern’ perspective (see Yiftachel 2009). It thereby links with other ‘Southern’ theorists in their critique of North-Western origins of knowledge (see Connell 2013; Watson 2014).

Such approaches obviate the need to theorise—namely, offer urban theories from the global ‘South-East’, reflecting a diverse range of grounded conceptualizations emerging from the experiences of non-European-American regions. These perspectives, like the Aleph approach, emphasize the multiplicity of powers working on the city, and the manifold, uneven and unstable social, violent, economic and identity forces—together with numerous individuals and agents co-shaping space. As such, the Aleph approach echoes interventions in the debate on ‘the nature of cities’ made by critical scholars such as Roy (2014), who argues for the ongoing relevance of perspectives emphasizing postcolonial, gendered and governmental approaches, while still accounting for the heavy impact of globalizing capitalism; or Parnell and Oldfield’s (2014) call for a ‘Southern perspective’ in studying cities, their development and urban planning. The idea is not to create a false neat distinction between global North-West and South-East, which are increasingly intertwined and resist simplistic dichotomies. It is rather to illustrate the existence of multiple structural urban logics, irreducible to any single force. These emerge from the diverse ‘South-Eastern’ settings that are wholly different to the typical liberal-democratic urban North-West, and provide fertile ground for new ‘meso level’ (that is, neither universal, nor local) concepts and theories (see Connell 2013; Parnell and Oldfield 2014; Watson 2014).

For Borghes, the discovery of the Aleph is enmeshed in the struggle vis-à-vis several major forces prevalent in his Argentinian city—the landlord’s greed and his zeal to sell and destroy the house to make room for a newer, richer development; the personal attachment the storyteller has to the home; the hidden identity of the main house dweller; and the everlasting, though fading, lure of a past lover who was a regular visitor to the house. These forces cast a constant shadow on the story, and drive the
plot through the many details. They also lead to the discovery of the magical Aleph, through which one can unpack these forces and reassemble their existence through a wide range of places, concepts, pasts and presents.

Learning Jerusalem

Jerusalem offers a rare opportunity to ‘prize open’ a complex metropolitan area and show how urban regions, and engaged urban theorization, can progress beyond the debilitating fortification of theoretical and epistemological positions.

This is because Jerusalem can be conceptualized as a distinct Aleph, ‘a place of all places’. Because, as shown below, every place is constructed through time, Jerusalem also harbors a time of many times. Jerusalem is also a symbol, a signifier, an inspiration and a warning sign for the nature of future urbanism. Let us quickly walk into the city, and explore it using the vista point of the ‘Aleph epistemology’.

Fittingly, a short ‘walk’ through Jerusalem reveals a maze of forces shaping ‘the nature of the city’ which by and large cannot be reduced into one another. Some of these are often—and erroneously—overlooked by leading planning and urban theories, but are nevertheless critical in shaping of what Arabs often term ‘the flower of all cities’ (Zaharat al-Madai’n), or Jews ‘the complete city’ (Ir Shalem). In line with the Aleph approach, a short city ‘walk’ reveals a Jerusalem framed by parallel structural forces and discourses, including:

- A colonial city—the prominence of modern Jerusalem begins during the British rule, when its imperial–colonial government decided to place its provincial capital in Jerusalem. This gave the city an incredible impetus and reshaped its development according to foreign and imposed plans, methods, norms and resources. Later, in 1948, came a partition of the city between Israel and Jordan, which saw mutual ethnic cleansing and the establishment of two ethno-national city parts; in 1967 Israel conquered Jerusalem and the entire West Bank, expanded the city’s municipal boundaries by a unilateral urban ‘unification’. It forcefully (and illegally) incorporated Palestinians as non-citizen residents, while launching a long-term colonial strategy of Judaizing Arab Jerusalem, as part of what Israel claims is the rightful return of Jewish rule to the nation’s ‘eternal capital’.

Since then, large parts of Arab Jerusalem have remained unplanned and underdeveloped. These areas have been characterized by informal or semi-formal ‘gray spaces’—developments and groups that are neither fully included in the urban polity, nor destroyed or evicted (Yiftachel 2009; Avni and Yiftachel 2014). The pervasive informality prevalent in Palestinian Jerusalem resembles past colonial cities in Africa and Asia. This setting also gives rise to a Palestinian indigenous struggle throughout the metropolitan region. The Arab part of the Jerusalem metropolis, which covers over two thirds of its area, now includes an assemblage of villages, towns, tribes, suburbs and settlements. These create an indigenous urbanizing space, insistently resisting Israel’s colonizing project, with only partial success.

Notably, despite the colonial nature of Jerusalem being a structural force of the first order, it is rarely mentioned in the literature on the city. Most scholars, influenced by state and Western academic hegemony, prefer to treat the city as ‘divided’, ‘contested’ or ‘fragmented’. Most Palestinian scholars refer to it as ‘occupied’, although the civil nature of Israeli control and the constant settlement of Jews, make it more akin to a settler-colonial regime rather than military rule. Hence, in order to be credible, any analysis of metropolitan Jerusalem must deal with the colonial nature of urban development and the associated discrimination, racism, resistance, violence and terror.
Importantly for this paper, even beyond Jerusalem—and true to the Aleph approach—the colonial management of Jerusalem should not be treated as an exception, but rather a window to understand neo-colonial relations emerging in many other urban regions, where whole populations are subject to discriminatory treatment based on their inscribed identity, in regimes that are ‘separate and unequal’.

- A nationalized city—the Hebrew word ‘Tziyon’ (Zion) describes both the city of Jerusalem and the entire holy land. Hence, Jerusalem has been an epicenter of the Zionist project. In parallel to the project of Judaizing Arab Jerusalem, the planning of the city has been governed by strong nationalist and ethnocratic influences, which have shaped its public spaces, resource allocation, employment and urban design. Israel has imposed its law over entire Palestinian areas of the city, as defined by Israel, and has attempted since to impose law and order as a basic trope for governing the city, applying a discourse of civil rule in areas essentially occupied and forcefully incorporated to Israel. While not yet realized, Jerusalem (al-Quds) is also destined by Palestinians as their future national capital. This strongly shapes the Palestinian discourse about the city’s present and future, as the symbol of Palestinian national sovereignty. Therefore, and critically, Jerusalem is not only a contested city, but also a disputed part of two ethnocratic states (one existing, the other ‘in-the-making’), through which runs—at least legally and theoretically—one of the most contested interstate borders in the world (Yiftachel 2006).

- A religious city—it needs no retelling that Jerusalem is one of the world’s religious centers, accommodating some of the holiest places for Christianity, Judaism and Islam. As such, it occupies an immensely important place in the spiritual narratives and religious spatialities of all three religions. Jerusalem is commonly believed to be the core of creation, and the place from which the Profit has soared into the afterlife above. Consequently, the city is a site of massive pilgrimage and religious tourism, matched only by the likes of Mecca and the Vatican. The city is also home to major religious and ultra-orthodox communities, mainly Jewish and Muslim. The identity politics of Jewish Jerusalem revolves strongly around the level of religiosity in the city, with constant conflict over housing, public culture and norms and governance between the city’s secular, traditional, orthodox and ultra-orthodox communities. Among the Palestinians, Islamic movements have traditionally been strong as reflected in the power of Hamas during past Palestinian elections. Jerusalem’s urban history and current planning are strongly shaped by religious narratives, and its management is dictated by the close proximity and hypersensitivity of its holy sites. Needless to say, religious narratives are closely intertwined with colonial, national and developmental interests, highlighting further the need to study several structural logics simultaneously at work in this diverse urban region.

- A gendered city—given the strength of religious narratives, the high visibility of traditional ethnic cultures, and the prominence of religious sites and practices, Jerusalem is a particularly gendered city. Most Jewish and Muslim religious spaces are governed by rules of strict gender separation, coupled with the exclusion of women from much of the public sphere. In several Jewish neighborhoods, even pedestrian spaces are separated by gender, as is the most famous and sacred Jewish space—the Wailing Wall. Muslim spaces, similarly, are generally segregated, with holy spaces, most notably mosques, being strongly dominated by men. Orthodox men and women, Jewish and Muslim, are bodily marked by a strict dress code, which creates visible inscribed boundaries between genders and communities. As is often the case in multi-ethnic cities where
politics of identity are of paramount importance, the gendered ‘order of things’ has come to symbolize the identity of entire communities, with consequences that are often detrimental to gender equality and civil liberties. The gendered logic of space in Jerusalem is thus a structural force, which cannot be ignored by any critical theory accounting for the working of the city.

- **A globalizing city**—Jerusalem is also a quintessential global city—forming an icon of global religious worship, a major focal point for Jewish and Palestinian worldwide diasporas, as well as a major site for global investment. Yet, it is rarely mentioned in the global cities literature and its associated rankings as such, thereby exposing the partiality and narrow economic-centered nature of much of the literature (see Sassen 2005). Even beyond its religious and national importance, Jerusalem also created a strong globalized economic base, especially in the Jewish Western quarters. Industrial and real-estate development, as well as tourist and traditional manufacturing industries have created an economic foundation, which continues to be buttressed by government investment and spectacular mega-projects. Jerusalem is also a center of international culture which forms a major hub of mainly global Jewish, but also Palestinian cultural production and consumption. Other ‘globalizing city’ phenomena strongly evident in Jerusalem include widening class polarization and a notable rise in the presence of impoverished populations; a growing gentrification of the inner-city area; expansion of ‘gray spaces’; a rise in diasporic flows, capital and real-estate investment; and growing exposure to global media and discourses, that readily translate local events to global news. Given the nature of the global economy, it can be expected that Jerusalem will continue to rise as a global city, although much depends on the unpredictable nature of the Jewish–Palestinian conflict.

- **A political city of ordinary people**—Jerusalem is also an urban region of over 1 million ‘ordinary’ people, living their daily lives within the colonial, national, capitalistic and patriarchal city. Ordinary people often deal with the various dominations and many opportunities the city offers in ordinary sites—schools, communities, markets, malls, sport, entertainment and quotidian activities and challenges. Some Jews and very few Palestinians mobilize politically, in urban or national political arenas, mainly through urban political parties, which are active in the city’s Jewish areas. Most residents attempt to resist domination over their lives—be it colonial, capitalist, nationalist or patriarchal—privately or in their communities. Resistance in Jerusalem, like most cities, is often practiced through mundane, micro practices, and unlike its portrayal in the media, it is rarely heroic or violent. In that way, Jerusalem is also an ordinary city.

### Interactions

Needless to say, the above is only a partial list of structural forces operating in the Jerusalem urban region—expanding, retreating, clashing, imbricating or cooperating in the rich fabric of this most diverse of urban regions. Undoubtedly, there are other forces which can be added to the list, but even in its partial nature, it enables us to dwell on a rarely explored aspect of critical theorization—the nature of interaction between structural forces, in the messy business of producing and shaping ‘real’ urban spaces in the Jerusalem region.

Exploring seriously the interactions between forces driven by different, often conflicting, logics is a fundamental epistemological and methodological concern, which needs much greater attention than possible here. Yet, we should draw attention to the
ceaseless and coterminous operation of major forces in the shaping of the Jerusalem region—resembling the multiple vectors of social control termed ‘intersectionality’ by feminist theorists (see Bilge 2010). This clearly ‘earns’ Jerusalem its description as an Aleph—‘a place of all places’, created by the spaces, mobilizations and meanings of its diverse urban components. Most create a multitude of ‘places within a place’ and reflect a wide range of narratives, aspirations, transactions and political projects operating in the same territory, albeit with very different powers and resources (see Figure 1).

These structural interactions, which frame the ceaseless activities of social agents and individuals, bring to the fore the arenas and practices where conflicts and negotiations take place, and the ways in which they shape the uneven development of all cities. In other words, focusing on the interaction of forces draws attention not only to the ‘what’ of social powers, but also to the all-important ‘how’—the practices and tactics of spatializing abstract logics, interests and narratives.

Clearly, the above listing of forces is naturally not enough to form a new CUT. The ‘Aleph approach’ would require researchers to ‘unpack’ the ‘place of places’ and examine in depth the nature of interactions between these forces. It will thus seek to uncover the evolving power relations between the major logics driving the production of space, determined ‘through’ the planning and development of the city. This requires detailed analysis of the urban regime and the priorities it gives to certain projects, narratives and perceptions, in the allocation of material and symbolic resources, violence and oppression. Importantly, the Aleph approach will avoid assuming that hegemonic systems replicate themselves over time, but trace the changing nature of the interaction, which results in varying degrees of urban change. It will
acknowledge of course that social structures and oppressive regimes tend to endure, but will not take for granted their reproduction through space, time and society.

The papers of this special feature provide clear examples for the need to seriously study the dynamic (yet, never totally fluid) nature of structural interactions. This is clear in all papers, from which I draw one key example—the discussion by Oren Shlomo on contested sovereignty over Arab Jerusalem in general and the Silwan area in particular. Silwan lies at the southern edge of the Old City, and until 1967 was a near-city village, with tight traditional semi-rural community and mainly agrarian and pastoral economic base. During the British and Jordanian periods, the village became increasingly linked to the Jerusalem economy, and its space gradually urbanized. This was followed by an increasingly active land market and real estate development, still within a predominantly non-urban setting.

The Israeli conquest and colonization drastically changed the balance of forces. First, it ‘united’ Silwan with Jerusalem thereby accelerating its urbanization. Since the 1990s, urbanization was coupled with settling colonialism, exemplified by the construction of the highly contested Jewish project—City of David. Under the guise of this biblical–archeological and tourist project, Jews settled (illegally according to international law) in several parts of Silwan, launching a new type of urban colonial development ‘wrapped’ up with religious and national narratives and strongly supported by the Israeli state and Jerusalem municipality.

The new settler urban community has worked to introduce an essentialist and binary logic of segregated identities into the urban space, with colonialist, religious and nationalist, and gendered logics often overshadowing the logic of capital, development and good governance, used by Israel in other parts of the city. Without delving into detail, it is clear that the case of Silwan demonstrates both the coterminous existence of strong colonial, capitalist and governance forces that shape urban change; and the eminent possibility that the nature of engagement between these forces may change. In order to arrive at a credible and critical understanding of the nature of urban change in Silwan, we need to first release ourselves of a pre-determined framing of urban change by one structural force, without losing sight of the import of such forces, and their dynamic interactions.

**Dynamic structuralism**

The Aleph approach thus departs from the accepted logic of most CUTs, which tend to privilege a particular narrative of the world, most often Marxian or postcolonial, and at times also gendered, liberal or Foucauldian. The insightful nature of these theories does not negate their inevitable partiality in accounting for the multifaceted dynamics shaping urban regions.

On the other hand, the Aleph approach recognizes that cities are not merely ‘complex systems’ in which nameless forces evolve into patterns of ‘self-organization’, as some theories claim (see Portugali 2000), nor are they ‘postmodern’ places where all structural logics ‘melt into air’ within diversity, complexity and constant change (see Dear 2000), nor an endless series of ‘a thousand plateaus’ creating ever-changing, ‘post-structural’, non-hierarchica, ‘rhizomes’ of urban milieu, which cannot be articulated by our conceptual and analytical tools (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Instead, as noted, the Aleph approach suggests that the city is shaped by powerful frameworks and logics of power, that are relatively stable and consistent, although the manner in which these forces intersect and interact, and the relative power of each structure, should be open to the historical, political and economic inquiry, attuned to the conditions of each city.

This new CUT would then search for the most profound urban oppressions, dispossession and dislocations inside the spatial system, as well as the contradictions and
tensions, and ‘work back’ to understand and deconstruct their origins and formulations. It would seek to identify the drivers and resisters of power, opening itself to the possibility of multiple scales and forces (see Morston, Jones, and Woodward 2005). Such theory would thus provide a new structural and dynamic platform to understand the assemblages that make up the quotidian workings of urban life. In this way, the understanding of the city as an endless composition of changing assemblages may not be seen as an epis temological counter to a structural understanding of urban space (see Brenner 2009, 2013; McFarlane 2011). Instead, the Aleph approach will search for the structural logics of quotidian assemblages, and the manner in which tensions, contradictions and compatibilities create the patterns of the urban everyday, as well as possibilities for resistance and transformations.

This approach is set to enrich the leading paradigms in critical urban studies which at present embed the study of urban regions almost solely within the hegemonic context of globalizing capitalism (for review, see Marcuse and Imbroscio 2014; Scott and Storper 2014; Brenner and Smith 2015). The making of urban regions is routinely and too narrowly termed in most of the literature as ‘capitalist urbanization’, thus overlooking immense structural powers and urban politics that are often equally, if not more powerful, than global capitalism in shaping urban life.

There is no room here for serious illustration of this claim beyond mentioning, as one of many examples, the recent struggle over Cairo, which has shaken the ancient city over the last few tumultuous years. The fierce struggle over control of the city (and hence over Egypt) had more to do with demands for democracy, secularism or alternatively Islamism, and end to militarism, than with 21st-century global capitalism. This repeats itself in key cities such as Damascus, Istanbul, Baghdad, or Kabul. Needless to say, the logic of capitalism is ever-present in Middle Eastern cities, as in all cities, but it is far from a hegemonic factor.

**Time**

The nature of dynamic structuralism and the attempt to theorize ‘from the South-East’ also involves the introduction of time as an analytical element with which to fathom urban society. Global capitalism and neoliberalism which dominate existing CUTs are, by and large, timeless categories. Yet, time is a necessary, yet seriously understudied, foundation for grasping the nature of urban development and the meaning of particular territories, communities, identities and transformations. As famously noted by Sandercock (2003), constructions of time are embedded in the unending discursive and material making of every place. Consequently, the colonial, capitalist, gendered or religious forces identified above, as well as new concepts that may emerge, shape urban spaces with a particular construction time.

In this short paper we can only point to their existence and to the richness of obvious categories such as the framing of past, present and future of places; the construction of these times as diachronic and/or synchronic; as well as more sophisticated time-related categories such as linear and circular time flows, memory, salvation, speed, acceleration, suspension, erasure, as well as various degrees of urban permanency and temporariness. Urban development must therefore also be understood as an arena of ‘temporal spatializations’, in which different, and at times conflicting, notions of time negotiate and struggle, literally, over ‘their place’.

To illustrate, the status of ‘our time’ vis-à-vis ‘their time’ is a critical factor in privileging particular periods over others in the making of Jerusalem, as in any city. This has clear implications for preservation, destruction and valorization of urban areas and landscapes. The future, as an imagined time, also ‘belongs’ mainly to urban and national elites who can shape space at their will, while marginal groups are often left outside the planning process. In Arab Jerusalem, for instance, the period of Israeli colonization is
marked by the suspension of Palestinian time, urban meaning or future horizon. The Jewish colonization project and the attempts to resist it, form the main (though of course not sole) framework for understanding the recent development of Arab Jerusalem. In previous periods, such as Jordanian Jerusalem (1948–67), the main force in shaping the city was the Hashemite attempt to fully incorporate the population of Arab Jerusalem into the Jordanian nation-in-making.

Different perceptions of time relate naturally to the memories embedded in particular sites, and in their designated futures. In Jerusalem this does not entail only the attempts to anchor cultures in the urban landscape, but also in the attempt to erase, marginalize or alienate the time of groups threatening existing frameworks of power. Hence, urban time of particular Jerusalemite groups may also be continuous, ruptured, fragmented or imagined, thereby strongly shaping contemporary urban meanings and struggles.

In this way the Aleph approach would urge researchers to view urban spaces, developments, communities and conflicts through the construction of their contested times, as a fundamental framing of the transformation of urban power relations. This will add a critical factor in evaluating and reshaping the interaction between structural urban forces.

Beyond Jerusalem?

The Aleph metaphor and the above conceptual exploration, naturally open the horizon far beyond Jerusalem. Rather than presenting a closed and tight argument, the paper sees Jerusalem as an epistemological and political inspiration. It views the intense and diverse forces operating on the city as a baseline for renewed, engaged and critical understanding of the urban, governed by the logic of ‘dynamic structuralism’, and attentive to a variety of systematic forces of domination and resistance. It avoids the a priori privileging of one such force, as do most of the critical theories that dominate scholarship. While globalizing capitalism and nationalism are often most potent in shaping urban regions, many cases demonstrate the importance of other, often previously unarticulated, systematic forces, governed by different time constructions and divergent spatialities. The Aleph approach is hence more political than narrow critical theories, as it addresses a wider range of powers and oppressions, ceaselessly operating present and targetable in political systems or most urban regions. It lends itself as a foundation for translating critical theories into political, advocacy and professional practices aimed at progressive and radical social transformations.

The Aleph approach also illustrates an attempt to ‘theorise’ the city from the global South-East. It views urban regions as being often shaped by non-liberal tribal, religious colonial or nationalist forces. The ‘South-Eastern’ perspective allows the imminent possibility for the emergence of new categories, forces and concepts, which are articulated through engaged analysis. This is well illustrated by studies which already offer new categories and concepts as better grasping ‘South-Eastern’ urbanism, such as the de-colonization of planning (see Porter 2010); ‘deep difference’ (Watson 2014; Cohen and Margalit 2015); ‘multiplanar planning’ (Hillier 2011); ‘subaltern’ urbanism (Roy 2011); ‘metrozenship’ (Yiftachel 2015); ‘insurgent’ urban citizenship (Holston 2009; Desai and Sanyal 2012); ‘planning with insurgent religions’ (Luz 2015); or indigenization of the city (Perara 2002).

The Aleph approach holds that Jerusalem should be treated as neither a model city, nor as an exception, but rather as a hyper concentration of forces, events and movements to be found in most urban regions in various combinations and assemblages. Jerusalem exhibits a persistence of ‘old’ structural forces, such as colonialism, nationalism and religion, alongside ‘new’ trajectories such as globalizing capitalism, gentrification,
diasporism and expanding ‘gray spaces’. Hence, Jerusalem can be said to simultaneously harbor the past and future of the urban. In Jerusalem we can thus see all types of cities, and in all other cities we can see Jerusalem, much like the Aleph, as described by Borghes’ magical pen:

‘In the Aleph […] I saw a monument I worshipped in the Chacarita cemetery; I saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo; I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon—the unimaginable universe.’

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References


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