

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

October 1, 2015

Sharon Rotbard, *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, MIT Press, 2015, 256 pp., \$24.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780262527729.

The book *White City, Black City* by Israeli architect Sharon Rotbard was first published in Hebrew in 2005 and was only recently translated into English and published by the MIT Press in 2015. Describing the historical relationship between Jaffa (Black City) and its newer neighbor, Tel Aviv (White City), this book makes explicit its motivation in one of its very last sentences: “there is today no difference between neighborhood politics, city politics, national politics and global politics” (189). This remarkable coordination of the various scales of governance in Palestine-Israel corresponds to the same coordination of scales of design: objects, walls, buildings, streets, and cities operate within the same scheme of power relations forming the current Apartheid condition of this territory. Through its chronological progression beginning with historical events that precede 1948, Rotbard’s book is a helpful corrective to the usual ways of thinking about the problem, too often focused on 1967 and the invasion of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

Tel Aviv was founded in 1909 by part of the Jewish community in Palestine, then under Ottoman sovereignty. In the first part of the book, Rotbard undertakes to demystify the city’s narrative beginning, described poetically as the birth of a white city on the dunes. In direct and empirical contrast, he describes the earth-leveling that was necessary for the Jewish city to exist (43). Myths are indeed at the core of the Zionist project and, should they not provide a narrative legitimizing the colonial actions that their literal application necessitates, we might even appreciate these myths’ literary function. As an example of how effective this narrative-military campaign has been, in 2004 the “white city of Tel Aviv” even gained the status of a UNESCO World Heritage site.¹ Rotbard, therefore, is intent on deconstructing the White City narrative, especially with reference to its continued substantiation and incarnation in modernist architecture.

¹ “White City of Tel Aviv” is the name given by UNESCO itself. Cf. <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1096/>>. But, as Owen Hatherley writes in his review of *White City, Black City*, “according to the story given official benediction by UNESCO, German-Jewish architects trained at the Bauhaus school in Dessau fled the Nazi suppression of modern architecture in 1933 and built a city according to their ideals in mandatory Palestine. In reality, Rotbard notes, only four Bauhaus students ever emigrated to Palestine” (Owen Hatherley, “White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa – a demolition job,” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/22/white-city-black-city-architectre-and-war-in-tel-aviv-and-jaffa-review>>).

Again, we should not debunk Tel Aviv's construction myths because of their literary essence but, rather, because of the violent implications of these myths on the Palestinian population, in particular the inhabitants of Jaffa, the Black City. Interestingly, Rotbard goes back as far as 1799 and Napoleon Bonaparte's siege on Jaffa as the precursor of an antagonism between Palestinian Arabs and Jews. In a "colonial delirium," Napoleon wrote a proclamation that foreshadows the Balfour Declaration one hundred and eighteen years later, in which he invites the "Israelites," "rightful heirs of Palestine," to "conquer [their] patrimony."²

Jumping forward in time, Rotbard notes how the British army's Operation Anchor was the first of many occurrences when urban planning and warfare were used in concert as a means of dominating and controlling the Palestinian population in Jaffa. Taking advantage of the state of exception triggered by the 1936-1939 Great Arab Revolt against British rule and Jewish immigration to Palestine, Operation Anchor started on June 16, 1936 with the evacuation of the old city's population, followed three days later by the destruction of two hundred and thirty-seven Palestinian Arab buildings to create an avenue to the harbor (94). This stratagem of urbanism by destruction, which utilizes the creation of large streets to fragment the dense urban fabric, recalls the one developed by the Baron Haussmann in Paris between 1852 and 1870. It remained, according to Rotbard, a central strategy of the Israeli army in general, and Ariel Sharon in particular as witnessed in Rafah in 1971 and in Jenin in 2002. Simultaneously, Jewish settlements were built in many sites of Palestine in order to "establish, in the shortest amount of time, a network of new settlements that would create a Jewish contiguity and define the future borderline of the State of Israel" (93). Thus, we can observe how the combined strategies of warfare, urbanization, and settlementization undertaken by Israel in the West Bank, Gaza (disengaged in 2005), and the Golan Heights (Syria) since 1967 are continuations of these historical precedents.

Another Zionist myth describes the creation of the State of Israel as the fierce battle of independence against the Arab armies threatening a second Holocaust. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has deconstructed this narrative in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.³ He indeed showed how the Jewish armed takeover of Palestine began months before May 15, 1948 when the British Mandate ended, the State of Israel was proclaimed, and the Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi and Jordanian armies (disorganized and lesser in number than the Israeli armed groups) entered into war with the newly formed State. As far as Jaffa was concerned, Rotbard describes the violence starting as early as December 2, 1947, thus making the middle and upper Palestinian Arab class flee from the city. Consequently, the local economy collapsed. The full-scale attack on Jaffa by the Etzel (aka Irgun) Zionist paramilitary group started on April 25, 1948:

This began with a rain of mortars over the city, sustained right up until the old Arab capital fell. According to Palestinian accounts, the bombardments were coupled with radio broadcasts in Arabic in which the Etzel promised the civilian population that their fate would be similar to that of the inhabitants of the village of Deir Yassin, near Jerusalem, who had been massacred a few days earlier on April 9, by the Etzel and Lehi's [Stern Group] fighters. At the same time, the Haganah launched 'Operation Chametz' in the villages surrounding Jaffa: Salame,

² Letter by Napoleon Bonaparte quoted by Rotbard, *White City Black City*, 67.

³ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: One World, 2006).

al-Hiriya and Yazur all fell before May, while Fedja and Sheikh Munis were forced to surrender even earlier, leaving Jaffa disconnected from its hinterland. (101)

A year later, Jaffa was annexed to Tel Aviv and Rotbard affirms that “it remains under military occupation to this day” since the Israeli army has established many barracks and other facilities in the Palestinian city (110).

In the 1960s, Israeli urban plans were drawn to renovate Old Jaffa that can best be characterized as a form of orientalization of the city, presenting it as a picturesque fragment of the past in opposition to its modern counterpart, the White City. Significantly, in these Israeli designed urban plans for the Palestinian city, Rotbard notes, the 1936 military transformation of the city was maintained, thus lending an additional level of legitimacy for the military to plan urban fabric.

In the recent years, Jaffa has been and continues to be subjected to another colonial phenomenon that many working class neighborhoods in Western cities currently experience: gentrification. Luxury residences and hotels are built on the northern part of the city, which has been redefined as “a leisure and tourism zone” in the urban plan in order to facilitate their construction; the port now hosts shops and art galleries while the market was transformed in a food court (186). Such a process is symptomatic of less spectacular forms of violence than militarized ones, which are nonetheless applied on populations with just as much systematization. Capitalism drives this normal violence that pushes long-time inhabitants to migrate further away from their “right to the city.” In the case of Jaffa, this process is inscribed in the historical dispossession described above.

Although Rotbard does not want to describe it as more than “Tel Aviv’s own poor allegory of itself,” one building in particular can be seen as the architectural paradigm of such a dispossession: the Etzel museum, opened in 1983. Situated in what used to be Jaffa’s neighborhood of Manshieh, destroyed in 1948 and subsequently appropriated by Tel Aviv, this rather clumsy-looking building consists in of a black glass box built upon a former Palestinian Arab house in ruin. Its architects’ statement, quoted by Rotbard, is particularly indicative of their embrace of the ideology conveyed by the building: “from the shattered walls of the old building grow dark glass walls, [...] schematically completing the building to what it once was, [...] an attempt to freeze the special moment and time of the day when Jaffa was liberated.”⁴ The domination of the modernist glass box—a pale imitation of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe—over the stone Palestinian ruin does not need any subtext to be understood: it is the White City dominating the Black City. If it was not a museum dedicated to what is considered by many as a terrorist group, one could almost think of this building as a political artwork, revealing the Palestinian ruins on which the State of Israel is built, when many of these ruins have been destroyed and hidden by seeded forests all over the territory after 1948. The English edition of *White City, Black City* did not miss the message recounted by the Etzel museum as its cover incorporates two photographs of the building: one as seen from Jaffa, the other from Tel Aviv. While the dark glass part of it echoes the luxury residential towers in the first photo, the solid stones dialogue with the ruins of Old Jaffa in the second. These two photographs show how the Black City and the White City have to exist while looking at each other. Rotbard’s book teaches us what to see when we look at them, and to exhume the violence the first experienced to allow the second to be built according to its myths.

⁴ Plaque in the Etzel museum quoted by Rotbard, *White City Black City*, 129.

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Citation Information

Lambert, Léopold, Review of *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, *SCTIW Review*, October 1, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/751>.

ISSN: 2374-9288