

The Language of Modernity: Urban Design in Mandatory Lydda¹

Haim Yacobi

General view of Lydda between 1900 and 1920, American Colony Photography Department, *Source: G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress.*

Introduction

From which historical point should a study of the spatial transformation of a given city begin? Such a question stands at the core of all research that aims to study the interrelation between politics, urban design and space. In the context of this article I will begin to analyse the spatial transformations of al-Ludd in the context of the British Mandate period (1920-48). This choice is not arbitrary, rather, I recognize the power of the discourse of modernity in this period in relation to space production in Mandatory Palestine, which was similar to that in other regions under British rule.² The practice of urban design during this time became an important agent of modernization that often masked other imperial interests. Specifically, this article demonstrates how the scientific idiom of the early twentieth century shaped the “science of planning” in order to solve the “arithmetic problem” of space and thus accumulated influence as a progressive tool of governmentality during the Mandate period. However, as we shall also see, planners were simultaneously responding to contemporary notions of historical preservation, which frequently conflicted with the call for modernization.

This article will focus in greater detail on the development of Lod during the Mandate period. Beyond the city’s demographic and economic growth, many changes occurred at the administrative and municipal levels after Ottoman rule ended in 1918. For example, in 1934, a new law was passed concerning municipal elections and, as a result, some of the families gained political positions in the city. These changes brought about a spatial extension of the built area outside the borders of

the old city, followed by new urban schemes initiated by the Mandate regime and designed by British planner Clifford Holliday, and later by Jewish architect Otto Polcheck.

Theoretical Notes

*About the landscape of Lod...it was poor, quite poor; one-floor houses, maybe two floors. There was a hint of a public garden and it was very miserable...the only interesting buildings were the church and the mosque.
(Interview with Otto Polcheck 18.5.2001)*

With these words, architect and city planner Otto Polcheck opened the interview I conducted with him. These words, rooted in a wider planning epistemological context, were powerful at the time that Polcheck was involved in planning. In the coming paragraphs, I discuss the theoretical significance of words in attaching meaning to the built environment – a process that is not neutral but rather dependent upon the meanings attributed to the built environment by agents of power – whether they be architects, politicians or public figures.

In this context I aim to examine the discourse that accompanied the design and planning of Mandatory Lydda through attention to texts and visual representations of space from that period. My decision to focus on discourse is unusual, as most discussion of the built environment, its production, and the role of professionals in this process does not analyze the significance of language and discourse as part of the planning process. According to Markus and Cameron (2002), the absence of discourse analysis in the fields of architecture, urban design, or landscape architecture is often explained by saying that spatial practices are not verbal but rather sensual and visual. However in reality spoken and written language of and about planning plays a crucial role in our understanding.

Nevertheless, there are some critics who suggest that analyzing planning discourse is central for understanding spatial processes³. During the process of planning and designing cities, neighborhoods, regions, or any other planned spaces, there are ongoing dialogues between the client and the planner, between the planner and other planners and architects, as well as with decision makers and politicians. As noted by Cuff (1992), the scope of textual materials produced and exchanged is quite wide, including notes, official letters, contracts, regulations, planning programs and official representations (both visual and verbal) of architectural projects in professional journals and brochures. These texts contain descriptions and explanation that narrate the logic, aesthetics, and contribution of the projects.

Indeed, in order to conceptualize the very act of planning and design, the planner uses language. The importance of language in understanding the construction of a sense of place (both tangible and symbolic) must be contextualized in the wider social context of language use. As a social practice, language mediates power relations

and contributes to the reproduction of norms, beliefs, attitudes, and relationships between subjects. In other words, language is not a neutral medium of communication but rather a means of representation.⁴ Moreover, as a symbolic system that enables communication, language in turn produces categories that have significance in spatial terms such as order/disorder or private/public. Following this line of argument, the choice of the “speaker” or the “writer” of a given text – as well as the ideologies of that speaker – shapes the way in which the “reader” or “listener” perceives it.

In this context, it is important to discuss the notion of the often-used term *discourse* in relation to this article. The definition of discourse varies according to the discipline and approach in which it is used. Hence, Fairclough⁵ suggests the need to recognize two important distinctions in meaning. The first stems from linguistics, which argues that discourse is an interaction through which people communicate in a given social context. The second originates with the critical social theory that has followed from Foucauldian thinking, and which defines discourse as part of the processes of social construction and knowledge production that are situated within existing power structures.⁶ Indeed, discourse, in Foucauldian terms, is a bounded term of social knowledge, a system of understanding the world through which reality can be perceived. Thus, discourse links power and knowledge together, and enables those who have power to define what is known and the way it is known. In “The Order of Things” this idea is further crystalized by Foucault when he explains that discourse is “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences and possibly formalized systems.”⁷

In their book “The Words Between the Spaces,” Markus and Cameron (2002) follow Foucault in suggesting that there are links between linguistic and social aspects of discourse. Their work focuses on critical discourse analysis that examines linguistic forms and their contribution to the social construction of reality, and hence exposes the power relations that operate in a given social and political context. Methodologically speaking, they refer to Scollon’s mediated discourse theory⁸ as a potential tool for the analysis of political reality.⁹ More specifically, Scollon’s mediated discourse theory focuses on what discourse causes in reality, i.e., what actual operations are taking place by following the social agents that produce the specific discourse.

Scollon’s approach is highly relevant to the analysis of planning discourse since planning operates not just between the planner (who produces the discourse) and the users (Yacobi 2009). Rather, planning discourse is reproduced within the community of practice, a term defined by anthropologists Lave and Wenger (in Markus and Cameron 2002) as a group of people that produces shared knowledge such as journalists and architects. These professional communities act according to specific practices that create links among the different members - not not only at the technical level (e.g., as members of the same organization) but also in relation to the epistemological ties between individuals that are expressed in the linguistic register, i.e., the language and terminology that they share.

As I argue throughout this article, planners and architects use a linguistic register which in turn enables this specific community of practice to act and, more than

that, to conceptualize space in a specific manner, to express their vision and to act. Indeed the very use of language facilitates the experience of the community of practice in accumulating knowledge, in categorizing it and in reproducing planning knowledge back into the professional sphere. Hence, buildings and other built artifacts are material objects that “enclose and organize space” and they can be read as representations through the texts produced by the community of practice. In this way “[t]hey are products of linguistic choices which construct reality in particular ways”¹⁰ If we follow the Foucauldian argument that deconstructing discourse reveals the hidden values behind the surface of language¹¹ then the specific planning language that is used must be contextualized within the specific power structure. Planning arguments concerning the “public interests” must thus be seen in a more critical way that exposes the “dark side of planning”¹² To put it differently, professional discourse contributes to the justification of ideologies, which are often hegemonic interests. Indeed, the built environment is a social object that must be examined critically¹³ in light of the following questions: how the design of the built environment reproduces social and political power relations; what social activities are enhanced or oppressed in the new space created; and how the planned environment supports ideological norms implicitly as well as explicitly.

The above questions are used as the scaffolding of this article as it focuses on spatial transformations in the city of Lydda throughout the British Mandate regime. More specifically, this article discusses the development of planning knowledge and its articulation within modernity as it shaped the space in Mandatory Palestine and embodied colonial norms. This professional knowledge, I argue, is itself an expression of a political agenda reflecting the power and knowledge relations in a given society. In Lefebvrian terms, my claim is that the conceived space is an expression of ideology and thus the built environment cannot be seen as merely a technical device for organizing space. Rather, as with other cultural representations, it defines, expresses, produces, and reproduces power relations.

The Double Gaze of the Orient

The town of *al-Ludd* is located at the edge of the coastal plain, and has developed around the historical junction of routes leading from west to east (Jaffa-Jerusalem) and from south to north (Egypt-Syria-Lebanon). There is evidence of intensive commercial activity in this area from the 1870s (Cook’s Tourist’s Handbook, 1876), and the first railway line to the city as constructed as early as 1892. As part of the geopolitical changes in the Middle East at the beginning of the twentieth century, the British occupied the city in 1917,¹⁴ and invested widely in development in Mandatory Palestine.¹⁵ In Lydda, which was the city’s name under the Mandate regime, development included the construction of a train station, the renovation and enlargement of the rail tracks, and the establishment of an airport.

The British occupied Lydda in 1917, and in 1920 they established a civil regime

in the city.¹⁶ In this period, most of the built area was concentrated in *El Hara Esh Sherquiye* - the eastern quarter - which was surrounded by agricultural plots and olive groves. The built area, forming a triangular-like shape, was characterized by a dense fabric of one- and two-floor houses constructed of stone and surrounded by patios for domestic use. Similar to other Arabic-Islamic cities shaped by socio-religious law¹⁷, spaces for commercial and manufacturing activities were attached to the dwelling environment.

Nevertheless, a closer view on areal photographs shows that in 1918, the city had already expanded both towards the *Hara El Gharbiye* - the western quarter - and towards *Hara El Jnubie* - the southern quarter. These clusters formed ordered structures with streets wider than the old city alleys. The new houses were also one and two floors in height, but these were surrounded by walls and private gardens. According to a memoir written by Dr. Majaro, a Jewish physician who dwelled in Lydda and served the local population, the inhabitants in these quarters were mainly Christians.¹⁸ This observation correlates with Migdal's argument that urbanization among the Arab Christians at that time was more significant than among other communities.¹⁹

Migdal's discussion of the process of urbanization within the Palestinian population during the period of the British Mandate offers useful information about population growth and the transformation of Lydda.²⁰ Statistics on population growth also come from the British Mandate Department of Statistics, which reports 8,103 inhabitants of Lydda in 1922, while the Anglo-American committee counted 16,780 inhabitants in 1944.²¹ Some of the more significant acts of the Mandate regime were the mapping of Palestine as well as the promotion of western norms in regional and urban planning within both Jewish and Palestinian settlements. In this context, their declaration of Lydda as the regional capital city included massive investments in infrastructure, the establishment of the international and military airport, as well as the improvement and changes in the Ottoman railway route.

Indeed, the railway had a significant effect on Lydda's urban landscape, since what the British called "Lydda Junction" – the new train station and its surroundings – was not merely a rail-track intersection in mandatory Palestine, but an attempt to realize colonial utopia. Lydda Junction is located two kilometers southwest of the core of the old part of the city, isolated by a round circle drawn by the tracks of the new railway line. At first, the families of the British staff dwelled in huts inside this site, forming a camp-like layout, and in the beginning of the forties the temporary structures were replaced by permanent stone houses. The urban scheme was a typical example of British colonial design, shaped by planning principles of the garden city such as hygiene, light and air. The sketches made by the Drawing Office of the Palestine Railways Engineering Branch, seen in figure 1, clearly represent a European vision of an architectural style: red tile roofs, brick chimneys, as well as front and back gardens that stood in stark contrast to the design of the eastern quarter of the city.

The social and aesthetic norms of the British colony were also reflected in the design of Lydda Junction. As noted in the literature that deals with colonial

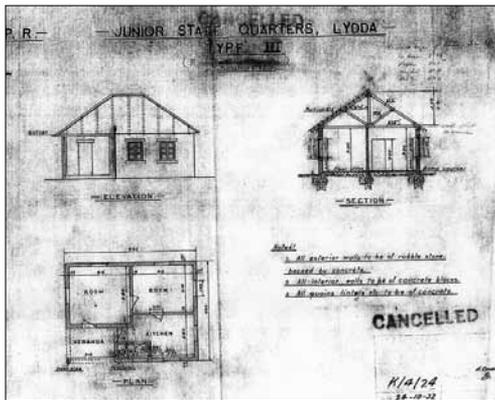


Figure 1. Lydda junction. Plans of the proposed junior staff housing units and the recreation building. Source: *The Israeli railways archive*.

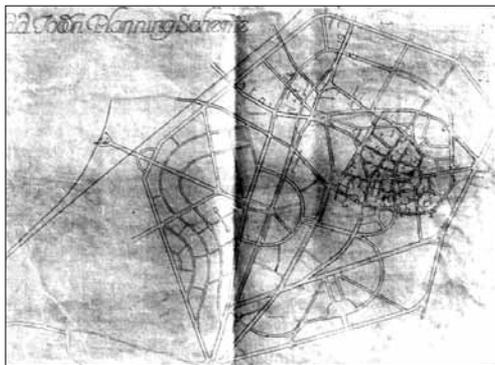


Figure 2. Clifford Holliday's urban scheme. Source: *Re-drawing based on Hymann 1994*.

urbanization²² one of its central characteristics was racial segregation. And indeed, only a few Jewish families dwelled together with the British workers in their new isolated quarter. In an interview with one of the oldest inhabitants of the neighborhood (Interview with Abu-Taufik 25.3.2001), I was also informed that some Arab-Christian families dwelled in Lydda Junction district as well, and that the population had to follow a strict set of rules, especially in relation to sanitation. Moreover, the social life of the inhabitants was organized around the local club, but the recreation center and tennis courts were only accessible to British inhabitants.

As I suggest in the introduction, it is important to see the design principles of Lydda Junction in a wider context. The following paragraphs provide evidence that the dominant urban planning approach in Britain, when imported to Palestine, was a continuation of a planning tradition that was developed towards the end of the nineteenth century. An illustration to my argument which has relevance to the design of Lydda Junction is the utopian text “Hygeia

– a City of Health” written by Richardson (1876). This document, as explicitly mentioned in its title, aims to solve the social and environmental maladies of the growing industrial cities. The text describes necessary modifications to cities including the width of their streets, the location of public buildings and spaces, as well as the need for infrastructure such as a sewage system. Richardson’s vision also included detailed instructions concerning the private home in a special chapter devoted to the housing unit. Such spatial transformation, it was believed, would also transform the population’s behavior.²³ These planning and design perceptions, as I elaborate elsewhere (Yacobi, 2009) dominated planning practice and also shaped Lydda’s built environment.

However, British influence in Palestine through planning did not end in the design and construction of the Lydda Junction district. Some of the acts of the Mandate regime included the implementation of Western modern norms in regional and urban

planning within the Jewish and the Arab communities in Palestine²⁴. The scope of this project was wide, and included the preparation of 400 master plans for cities and towns all over the region.²⁵ This approach of “importing” new spatial forms to non-western societies characterizes colonial discourse²⁶ an argument that can be backed also by architect Otto Polcheck, who was an active planner in Palestine during this period, when he states that “it was a revolution at the time. Before [the Mandate regime] the situation was abandoned. Luckily the British were town-planning-minded so they prepared plans” (Interview with Architect Otto Polcheck 18.5.2001).

The earthquake of 1927 that resulted in the demolishing of parts of the city as well as a population growth that saw 11,250 city inhabitants by 1931,²⁷ caused the Mandate authorities to initiate a new urban scheme for Lydda.²⁸ The plan was defined as an “Earthquake Reconstruction Scheme” for the construction of new housing and the improvement of sanitation and infrastructure.²⁹ Clifford Holliday, a British town planner, was in charge of this project, which was approved in August 1929³⁰ Holliday had worked in Liverpool for Patrick Abercrombie, who had encouraged him to apply for a job as the Civic Advisor to the City of Jerusalem. Holliday was involved in urban planning in Palestine from 1922 to 1935, and his work includes the preparation of urban schemes for both Jewish and Arab towns such as Jaffa, Tiberias, Ramla, and Netanya³¹ When Holliday returned to Britain, he became involved with preparing urban schemes for the colonies such as Colombo and Gibraltar, while his best-known project was the design of Stevenage New Town in Britain³² These projects as also indicated in Holliday’s article (1938) share similarities with his urban scheme for Lydda illustrated in figure 2.

Following Holliday’s vision of the city during the 1930s the Southern and the Northern quarters (*Hara El Jnubiya and El Hara Esh Shamaliya*) were the primary areas of expansion, and they formed a pattern of ordered plots, blocks and roads, with the olive groves and agricultural landscape around them. In keeping with Western notions, commercial buildings were constructed facing the main road, as well as public buildings such as the schools at the edge of the Southern quarter. The development of a road system was also significant, including a new road within the old city fabric. This photograph also shows the growth of the Lydda Junction district. Interestingly enough, despite the modernist position in designing the city, Clifford Holliday also advocated the preservation of the ancient eastern quarter. This attitude is expressed in his article “Town Planning in Palestine,” which criticizes the common approach of the British Mandate Planning Commission:

*[A]ttention is now to be given to the sterile towns of Gaza, Hebron, Bethlehem, Bait Jala, Acre and Jericho, all beautiful and romantic towns which may be better left unplanned.*³³

Holliday’s oriental gaze characterized the community of practice at his time. The beauty of the “unplanned city” is attached to a wider cultural context that referred to the landscape of the holyland as a testimony to the biblical landscape and to the

Protestant myths that were linked to the holyland's memory. Different descriptions in this spirit, both textual and visual, have been published by European voyagers who sought to see the existing landscape as a lived witness to the past.³⁴

“Can one call it a city?”

In the beginning of the 1940s, encouraged by the British officials, the local municipality of Lydda initiated a new plan for the city, this time selecting a Jewish architect and town planner, Otto Polcheck, who had acquired his experience in town planning in Mandatory Palestine. A description of the architect's voyage from Tel Aviv to Lydda gives an impression of the reality in Palestine in the early 1940s:

How did one travel to Lod at that time? You had to go to Jaffa; there in King George Street there was a kiosk in front of the Anglo-Palestine Bank. There you took an Arab bus....It was in 1942 or 1943, I took the bus and I was afraid....At that time there were always riots. I had a special costume for such dangerous areas; I was dressed as a Christian pastor.

(Interview with Otto Polcheck, 18.5.2001)

Polcheck's view of Lydda as an important node in Mandatory Palestine, can be seen in the graphic representation shown in figure 3, which was prepared by him as part of his study of the site he was invited to plan. When I asked Polcheck about the meaning of this drawing, he answered:

These radiuses surround Lod as their center. I wanted to point to Lod as a regional center for the whole area....Here there is a Jewish zone and there an Arab zone....This drawing is the influence of the British town planning approach done by me.

(Interview with Otto Polcheck, 18.5.2001)

Yet, Polcheck's description, as well as his view of the city cited in the introduction, does not fully fit with the image of the city as it appears in the aerial photograph from 1944. I would propose that Polcheck - as an agent of a modernist planning paradigm - shaped his views according to western norms that were the outcome of his academic and professional socialization as narrated by him:

I studied in Czechoslovakia....I studied for one trimester in the Bauhaus School. Ernest Neufert was the bible for architects in the entire western world and he was my professor of architecture.

(Interview with Otto Polcheck 18.5.2001)

And indeed, when I mentioned the existence of the ancient part of the city, Polcheck's

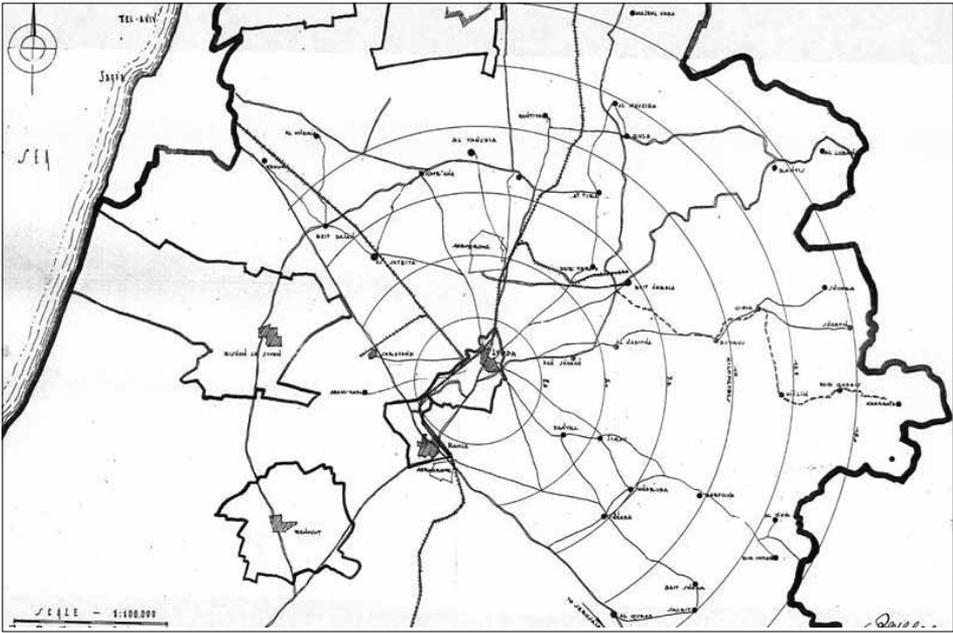


Figure 3. Regional scheme beginning of the 1940s (estimated). *Source: Otto Polcheck's private archive.*

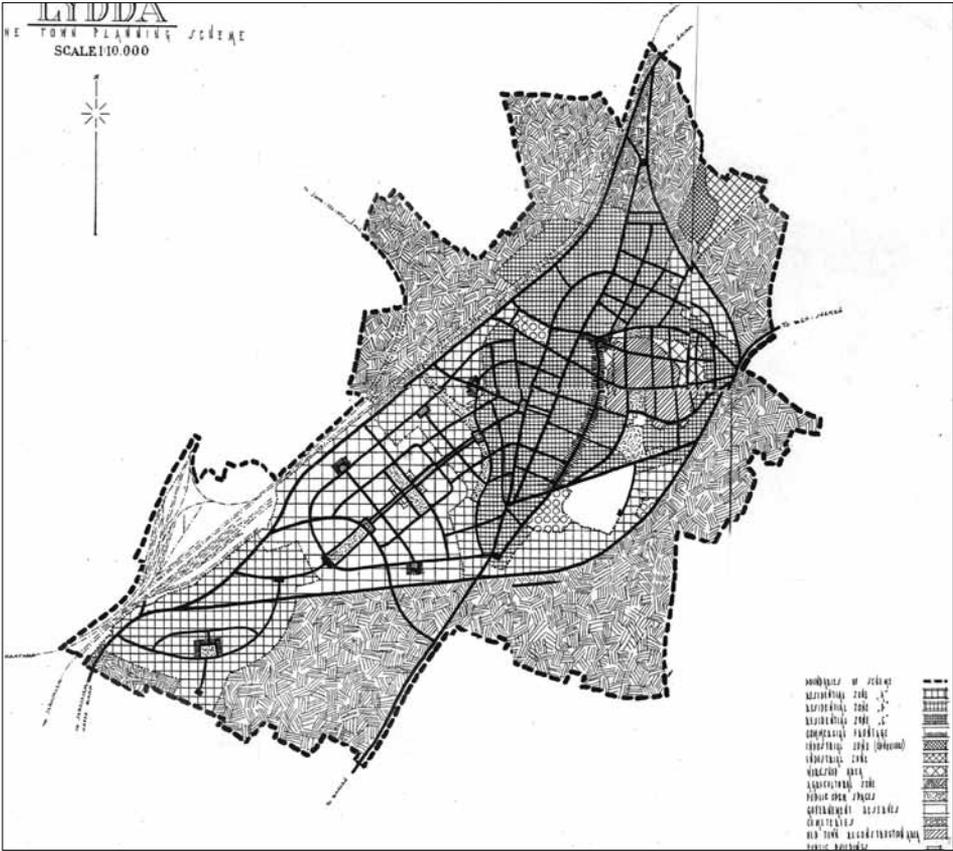


Figure 4. Otto Polcheck's urban scheme. *Source: Otto Polcheck's private archive.*

reaction was clear: “Can one call it a city? It was not a city! It was just a local municipality.” Polcheck’s definition of what a city is contains a whole set of norms, conceptions, and images that can be read in relation to what Edward Said has called Orientalist discourse. Said analyzes the way in which Europeans have constructed an image of oriental culture and people as less civilized, and thus demanding to be governed by others. This discourse is reflected in governmental texts as well as in literature constructed on dichotomies articulated as part of a ‘natural’ way of thinking, suggesting that western culture is superior, civilized, and progressive while oriental culture is characterized as barbarous and backward. Bringing this critic to Polcheck’s attitude points to the ways in which, by dismissing the idea of the eastern quarter as an actual ‘city,’ he reveals the assumptions on which his planning was based: that modern architecture was superior to ancient – despite the beauty of the latter.

What, then, was the vision for Lydda, and what was the purpose of the new plan? According to Polcheck, the main objective of his scheme was that he creates a town plan on the basis of which Lydda’s inhabitants would be able to apply for building permits. Apparently, the previous scheme was too general and thus the landowners in the city built “wherever they wanted and the municipality was satisfied” (Interview with Otto Polcheck, 18.5.2001). Polcheck’s new planning guideline intended, indeed, to have more control on land use and construction regulations of Lydda’s landowners.

As the new town plan shown in figure 4 demonstrates, the idea was to make a dense city core with a principal commercial road, and to allocate land for other uses such as industrial zones, parks, and public open spaces, as well as less dense housing districts around the center. Beyond the area that was already built, Polcheck suggested that they develop a “garden town that was at that time in fashion.” Indeed, one of the issues raised here is the importance of newness; a theme that is a central concept of the colonial city which aims, according to King,³⁵ to transform the local population economically, socially and culturally – an issue that was central to the planning sphere in Mandatory Palestine.

Polcheck’s approach was a product of the “scientific” professional knowledge that governed the planning discourses at that time. Formal education, as well as conferences that became popular events for exchanging ideas, transferred this knowledge. However, it is important to note that modernism should not be seen as a total divorce from the past. Rather, as discussed in one of these conferences, the professional position towards the old urban fabric is significant, as noted, for instance, in a report about Professor Brown’s speech at the London Town Planning Conference:

...little sympathy for the iconoclastic city planner who yearned for a ‘clean slate’ that he might make design untrammelled by the past....Cities are not only made but grow....The growth is continued not only by physical but by human environment, and is closely dependent on history. To wipe out this history’s evidence may be to take away more than the town planner can give.³⁶

The dualistic nature of this discourse - referring to planning as a rational act and the local landscape as an organic artifact - provides a useful context for looking at Holliday's and Polcheck's work in Mandatory Lydda and explain the seeming contradiction implicit in some of Polcheck's earlier quotes. The professional realm in which they acted emphasized the importance of their scientific planning in parallel with an appreciation of the picturesque beauty of the existing built environment that must be preserved. This notion must be remembered while discussing the work of Holliday and Polcheck; on one hand, the "chaotic" texture of the city represented backwardness and underdevelopment on the part of the local population and, on the other hand, it had picturesque qualities that were to be preserved:

I did not want to touch the old city, I did not want to demolish it. I have kept it. We should have done that not only here but in Haifa and Jaffa as well, where we have destroyed too much.

(Interview with Otto Polcheck 18.5.2001)

Additionally, an important point that preoccupied Polcheck was that a garden city urban scheme demanded expropriation of private land for public use; a planning paradigm that in fact had legal support from the Mandatory Planning and Construction Law in Palestine. However, the implementation of such an approach contradicted the local perception of both the meaning of private property³⁷ as well as the cultural need for 'garden city'-style open spaces. In this context it is argued that the principles of the garden city planning approach contains ideology that goes beyond aesthetic and technical values, and highlights planning as a determinist act through which space will transform people's behavior.³⁸

Vis-à-vis this debate, Polcheck's vision met with objections from private landowners as well as from city council members who were, according to him, "concerned mainly with their [building rights] in their own plots." Here, we can recognize the inherent contradiction outlined by King³⁹ in relation to colonial planning. Statutory control that represents the "collective will of society," as well as assumptions concerning the cultural use of space (housing typologies and public open spaces, for instance), cannot be applied to culturally different pre-capitalist societies, who become, by definition, non-democratically governed. Moreover, the scientification of the act of planning required definitions of rules and norms concerning the aesthetic nature of the urban, exemplified by the following declaration in *The Architectural Record*:

The city which is white has the greatest refinement and charm. Paris, of modern cities the most beautiful in the world, is a city of ivory studded with pearly gray in a setting of green. Regents Street, London, is painted in white and cream, and to this is entirely due its attractiveness to the fashionable throng... All greater cities are either white or gray.⁴⁰

In response to such opinion, when Polcheck's town-planning scheme was finally approved in 1945, it included not only parceling regulations, but also architectural design standardization instructions that would "whiten" and "ordered" the built landscape of the city:

The external walls of all houses including outbuildings and garages and all columns and piers shall be constructed of or faced with natural dressed stone...

It shall be competent for the local commission to exercise full control over the design of any proposed building in all matters pertaining to appearance, choice of materials or manner of construction...

The District Commission may require the Local Commission to prepare or may itself prepare an architectural design for any street or quarter...

No corrugated or sheet iron shall be used externally on any building, part of a building, other than a door, shutter or similar fixture.³⁷

Like other processes of colonial urbanization, the planning of Mandatory Lydda demonstrates two strategies that were implemented. The first was isolation, as in the railway district that was built separated from but close to the Arab city, and the second was the introduction of new western urban principles and regulations such as Holliday's and Polcheck's schemes show. However, the old city, though underdeveloped, was seen as a picturesque object, reflecting the exotic, distanced image of the oriental indigenous.

The occupation of Lydda by Israel in the 1948 war did not allow the realization of Polcheck's garden city vision. Different geopolitics and ideologies began to shape Lydda's urban landscape that its name was changed from Lydda to Lod, which was the region's biblical name. As I discuss elsewhere in details (Yacobi, 2009), the work of British Planning during the colonial period nevertheless still had significant influence on the period after 1948, when the Israeli state was established.

Haim Yacobi is an architect and planner and a senior lecturer at the Department of Politics and Government at Ben Gurion University. His academic work focuses on the urban as a political, social and cultural entity. In 1999 he formulated the idea of establishing "Bimkom – Planners for Planning Rights" (NGO) and was its co-founder. His book (2009) The Jewish-Arab City: Spatio-Politics in a Mixed Community published by Routledge, London.

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