

The Potential Politics of Urban Artist-Run Residencies (UARRs) in East Jerusalem

Written by Dr. Zoe Bray

Art residents are generally appreciated as beneficial for both artists and the local community for their creative and collaborative qualities. However, in areas of conflict, the production of art may take on unpredictable political agencies.. This article discusses from an anthropological perspective the challenges to the development of artist-run residencies in East Jerusalem, an urban area at the heart of ethnic, religious and nationalist tensions. The article recounts the exploration phase of an initiative by independent artist and curator Anat Litwin to assess the potentials of *Urban Artist-Run-Residencies* (UARRs) in East Jerusalem.

Urban Artist-Run-Residencies (UARRs)

Israeli-American independent artist and curator Anat Litwin began imagining *Urban Artist-Run-Residencies* (UARRs) in 2006 as a particular kind of residency, special for actually being driven by artists who see “the act of hosting as an extension of their artistic vision and practice, linking art and everyday urban living and characterized as a grassroots, community-based artistic platform, which engages a participatory approach and

questions existing social and urban paradigms”.

In the context of the growing field of art residencies worldwide, experimentation with urban commons, and the flourishing social and urban art scene, Litwin considers UARRs as “vital urban pivots of creativity” (ibid). She explains that they are “set out of the main-stream commercial art market and usually embedded within changing urban areas”; “they tend to be small scale, independent, non-for-profit, communal initiatives led by artists, which often take place in empty urban spaces, or in the domestic settings of the artist's home, they enjoy flexibility, freedom and constant friction with everyday urban life. UARR platforms are usually driven by the quest to challenge the role of the artist in setting new social and cultural paradigms while artistically demonstrating participatory practices such as the ‘right to the city’, a demand for a transformed and renewed access to urban life on behalf of the local resident”. Litwin sees the potential in UARRs to lead “different artistic and urban participatory practices (...) such as ‘pop-up urbanism’, ‘re-appropriation’, ‘urban interventions’, ‘DIY’, (and) ‘communal gatherings’” (ibid). So she seeks to develop UARRs as both “an independent artistic genre of it’s own merit” and “a

catalyst for social and urban change”.

In this vein, Litwin launched her own UARR, entitled ‘The HomeBase Project’ (HB; www.homebaseproject.org), and took up residence in a series of cities across the world, New York in 2006–2009, Berlin in 2010–2013, West Jerusalem in 2014–2015 and Saitama, Japan, in 2015–2016. In each city, Litwin moved into a building where she could invite other artists to live and produce work in situ. The HB residency model includes a program of activities to connect the artist with the local community and to encourage collaboration on pressing local issues related to urban and social change, as well as to reflect together on possible future developments.

In 2013, Litwin earned a fellowship from the Andy Warhol Foundation to pursue her research on artist-run residencies, entitling it “Roundtable Residency Research” (RRR). RRR focuses on gathering people from different fields of knowledge to address together local social, cultural and urban needs. For this, Litwin benefitted from support from organizations such as Artis, Youkobo Art Space, Lunart Fund and the Willy Brandt Center. Litwin’s goal is to contextualize UARRs and “offer tools to assist embedding models of artistic hosting in the cities of tomorrow”. After hosting a roundtable in West Jerusalem in 2015, it was imperative to focus on East Jerusalem. RRR East Jerusalem was then initiated in partnership with Lunart Fund, a private non-profit family fund aimed at

increasing “the number of Israeli-Arab art and design professionals in the general population, foster supportive networks for the Israeli-Arab art community, and generate opportunities for cross-cultural discourse through joint Jewish-Arab art projects, within Israel and abroad”. Aware of East Jerusalem as a sensitive case, a whole part of Jerusalem annexed by Israel since 1968, Litwin sought a politically neutral partner with whom to collaborate locally, and connected with the Willy Brandt Center (WBC), a German non-governmental organization committed to dialogue and peace-building, whose headquarters are located on the Green Line in Jerusalem’s neighborhood of Abu Tor.

Litwin organized personal meetings with some key actors in the world of art in East Jerusalem to better understand firsthand the situation in this part of the city. One of these individuals was Riman Barakat, an East Jerusalemite who runs her own tour company called ‘Experience Palestine’ and who had previously worked at the Jerusalem-based public policy think tank, the Israel Palestine Center for Research and Information. Barakat is currently working for the Season of Culture project supported by the Shusterman Foundation, as the coordinator of the department “creative class of East Jerusalem”. Through the WBC’s funding, Litwin commissioned Barakat to serve as the co-host for the roundtable and to take Litwin on a tour introducing East Jerusalem’s art scene. Also through the WBC, I was invited to join the tour and be present at the roundtable, and to offer my insights as an anthropologist and artist with an outsider’s perspective.

Brief mapping of the art scene in East Jerusalem

The tour, which took place in December 2016, made clear that East Jerusalem has a relatively established and dynamic art scene, albeit working on an ad hoc basis and dependent on foreign funding. It began with a visit to the Al Ma'mal gallery in the Christian quarter of the Old City, welcomed by Aline Khoury, programming director of the gallery, which focuses on Palestinian contemporary art. The tour then headed to the Dar Al Tifel Palestinian Heritage Museum, located in the neighborhood of the American Colony, which also comprises a school and the cultural center Nashashibi, containing ancient Palestinian and local Arabic artefacts. Here, we met with the director Khaled Khitab. Both Al Ma'mal and Dar Al Tifel have hosted and improvise artist residencies. Another important window of Palestinian art in East Jerusalem is Al Hoash and the Yabous cultural center, both in Azzahra street nearby. Al Ma'mal gallery, Yabous and Al Hoash joined forces recently as the Shafuq network to organize local joint Palestinian and international art initiatives. One important event is the Qalandiya Arts Festival, which takes place every two years since 2012 in East Jerusalem and some other major Palestinian hubs.

The Educational Bookshop and the Jerusalem Hotel close by are also key actors behind the large cultural activities in East Jerusalem. They launched for instance Nablus Road Open Days, an event that gathered numerous grassroots Palestinian cultural associations in the streets on and adjacent to Nablus road during several days in June 2016 and which plans to be an annual event. The Educational Bookshop is a key cultural reference in the area, including with the expat international and NGO communities based in East Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories; the bookshop in Salah Adin street is adjacent to the French Cultural Institute, and

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showcases literary events in English on Palestinian culture and history. Another major reference in the area, also closeby in the neighborhood of American Colony, is the Palestinian National Theatre El Hakawati, which serves as a key venue for contemporary manifestations of Palestinian culture.

All these artistic centers are bound by the Palestinian boycott of Israeli institutions. A participant of the tour explained that “otherwise it would be seen by the general Palestinian public as acknowledging and accepting Israeli occupation, and enabling its normalization.” Being bound by the boycott however does not prevent Palestinian cultural initiatives from working with Israelis on an unofficial basis: if the joint activities are “presented as just people getting to know each other, and to promote understanding, then that works well. What is important is that there is no media coverage, no officiality involved – officiality spoils everything”. An example was given with the nomination of Jerusalem by the Arab League as the Capital of Arab Culture in 2009, and for which numerous Palestinian cultural events were organized in East Jerusalem. It was apparently not a success “because of a total lack of preparation and misunderstandings of the political situation in East Jerusalem – the Palestinian National Authority cannot have any impact in East Jerusalem because it is controlled by Israel. For instance one activity was with a play organized by local children in the El Hakawati theatre; it got cancelled by the Israeli authorities because it had received funding from the Palestinian Authorities.”

East Jerusalem is furthermore the base for various foreign cultural centers, including the British Council, which are locally active with exhibitions, film festivals and other cultural encounters. Many international organizations and NGOs are also based in the area, which provide financial and infrastructural support to local Palestinian initiatives. All the same, East Jerusalem suffers from limited artistic vibrancy. Local Palestinians we spoke to during the tour

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^{aasd}pointed out the need for more art practice in East Jerusalem schools. East Jerusalem has become more conservative over the years, and has “suffered quite a brain drain” over the last few years; young people tend to leave in search of a better life. Local Palestinians we spoke to say they go to Ramallah for arts and culture, including for a more liberal atmosphere, and a relatively cheaper lifestyle.



Litwin’s roundtable took place in January 2017, made up of a small and diverse selection of actors in East Jerusalem: Riman Barakat, artist Nasrin Abu Baker, Diana Mardi, coordinator of the East Jerusalem department of Bimkom, the Israeli non-profit for strengthening democracy and human rights in the field of planning, art therapist Khitam Edelbi, and legal adviser Rasem Masalha. Edna Fast, founder

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of Lunart, WBC's Juliane Druckler and myself were also
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~~present as listeners, together with Salam Qasem, a recent~~
graduate of the Israeli Bezalel Academy of Art, commissioned
by Litwin to document the event. Litwin laid out the key
questions for discussion: what are the current pressing
cultural issues in East Jerusalem? What is the role of the
artist in society at large? What role can a UARR play in
East Jerusalem to benefit its urban and human context? What
are the cultural, organizational and ethical aspects that
should be considered with regard to the possibility of a UARR
in East Jerusalem?

The importance of working with already existing initiatives
and centers was emphasized by all participants. These
initiatives however are clustered into the wealthiest and
most central neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, and roundtable
participants stressed the importance of having UARRs reach
out to the more isolated neighborhoods, particularly
Isawiya, Silwan and Shuafat. Participants stressed that the
main challenge for East Jerusalemite Palestinians is Israeli
occupation. East Jerusalemite Palestinians are afflicted by
Israeli occupation in several acute ways: one is the wall
constructed by the Israeli state separating parts of East
Jerusalem. This separation affects not only the physical
unity of East Jerusalem but most importantly that of its
inhabitants, dividing the population and preventing social,
economic - and cultural - fluidity. Going through the wall
involves checkpoints, cumbersome and humiliating ordeals.
Successfully getting through checkpoints depends on your
legal status: if you are a Palestinian; whether you have the
necessary permit, and if you are an East Jerusalem
cardholder; whether you have the sufficient up-to-date
evidence that you really live in the city. Inhabitants are
also regularly subjected to police and military checks and
roadblocks. This constant legal insecurity takes its toll on
its inhabitants together with the economic insecurity -
inhabitants are restricted also with institutional
obstacles, including from the municipality. This has caused
many people to leave East Jerusalem, go live abroad or in
the Palestinian West Bank.

~~Urban planning to the disadvantage of Palestinian East~~
Jerusalemites was also discussed. Mardi mentioned that as part of her research with Bimkom she had talked with female Palestinian inhabitants who pointed out the lack of public facilities, including green spaces for the children and lavatories, things that the male inhabitants, who are the only ones consulted if at all, do not bring up. Two other ominous factors in the difficult life of Palestinian East Jerusalemites are the gentrification and rapid development of new Jewish settlements. Building permits for Palestinians, however, are rarely issued.

As a consequence of these divisions, participants stated, East Jerusalemite Palestinians have an unclear identity: with their East Jerusalemite id cards, they are neither Israeli nor Palestinian. They consider their identity Palestinian, but live within an Israeli system, isolated and disconnected from the rest of the Palestinian Territories. As much as this situation leads to heaviness and darkness, participants pondered on how it can also be turned into something positive. There is an urgent need for creative channelling and transformation of these mixed emotions, and this is precisely where the potential of UARRs lies.

All participants reported on the thirst for art in East Jerusalem; how, for instance, when an art course is offered to the community, it is welcomed eagerly and participants ask for more. More art in East Jerusalem, say the participants, would help make life more bearable for many people, give them respite from their daily struggles, provide therapy and enable them to see and think differently, as well as offer broader education and horizons for the children. All the participants also expressed the wish for further collaboration and openness with others. They stated the need for a common language to communicate and overcome the barriers between people. Art could be this universal language, they agreed. Participants pointed out the advantage of artist-run residencies for East Jerusalem

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as a way to bring about artistic action, and breathe further creativity into the area. They would like to see incoming artists interact with locals and offer them new ways of seeing life. They also wish to see these artists learn from the locals, that they get involved in local life, that there is exchange and mutual “contamination”. The visiting artist would also ideally report back to the wider global community, spread the word about what they have lived whilst in residence. The participants also suggested that Jewish and Israeli Jewish artists come and experience life here for themselves, and thus, through their artistic activities, get to understand how things really are in East Jerusalem for Palestinians. At the same time, they acknowledged that this would be difficult to set up due to current security risks.



Next steps

The conclusions I drew from this tour and the roundtable discussions was that indeed UARRs in East Jerusalem could help East Jerusalemite artists and their community to develop their creative potential in the area and constructively address local social issues together. However, I would invite caution and further reflection on what could be at stake in this particular context, bearing in mind the complex relationship between art and politics in areas of conflict: Developing a UARR in a conflictive urban context such as East Jerusalem is much more complicated than the kind of art initiatives promoted by international and humanitarian organizations also active in this part of the city. UARRs are not

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meant to be political, unlike, for instance, the EU's

art initiatives. And yet the language employed

to describe UARRs can easily be interpreted as political in East Jerusalem, in “question(ing) existing social paradigms”, “demand(ing)” a “‘right to the city’, for a transformed and renewed access to urban life on behalf of the local resident”, talking about “‘re-appropriation’” and aspiring to be “a catalyst for social and urban change”. In a place like East Jerusalem where different power structures and entities are clashing, it becomes crucial to reflect on the precise meaning of these intentions: Whose social paradigms will be challenged? What and whose right to the city? Whose re-appropriation?

The other strength of UARRs is that they are devoid of organizational frameworks, that is, they are not invited, hosted or developed by any official entity. However, in areas of conflict, this can also pose certain challenges; as a grassroots and independent initiative, a UARR in East Jerusalem can be vulnerable; its intentions can be easily misinterpreted and it can unintentionally disturb. The premises and objectives of UARRs specific to East Jerusalem would need to be thoroughly and self-critically thought-through at every step of the way, with its independence and grassroots and apolitical nature clearly safe-guarded.

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