

Let the country's heart thrive

Thoughts on Tel Aviv's centennial conference on urban sustainability

• By JESSE FOX

At the ripe old age of 100, Tel Aviv has earned the right to a bit of introspection. From its origins as a dusty "garden suburb" of the ancient port city of Jaffa to its lofty position today as the thriving heart of the country, the city has come a long way. Despite the many mistakes that have been made over the years, Tel Aviv has developed as an exceedingly pleasant place to live, with a dynamic energy that attracts admiring visitors from around the world.

Sometimes it seems, however, that the city's leadership might not possess the wisdom to nurture the very things that make the city great. Thus it was a welcome surprise to hear that City Hall had chosen to kick off the city's 100th birthday celebrations with a conference on urban sustainability.

The Centennial Conference on Urban Sustainability, held earlier this month, could have provided an opportunity for a serious discussion of the city's past and future development. The city invited a series of excellent speakers from abroad, who brought fresh ideas to the table. Despite this, many of the discussions felt stale and lacking in substantive debate.

Below are a few thoughts on moving toward greater urban sustainability in Tel Aviv, based on what was (and wasn't) said at the event.

1. Be modest. This month's conference was anything but modest. The mayor, city engineer and a host of other official personalities waxed poetic about their own accomplishments. It was clear that the city's leadership thinks very highly of itself and its own abilities, but not very highly of other people's ideas – especially when they raise doubts about the way the city is used to doing things.

Way back in the 1960s, American theorist Jane Jacobs argued that large-scale urban development schemes often do more damage to cities than good – and leave behind scars that persist in the urban fabric for generations.

To those who shape the city: Be modest. Tread lightly today, for tomorrow the theories and ideologies that guide you will likely be discredited and discarded in favor of new ways of thinking.

2. Choose: cars or people. "Better cars do not make a better city, they make a city worse," said Richard Register in his presentation at the conference. In many cities around the world, the car is now seen as the greatest enemy of the livable city. In Israel, the car is still king.

In Tel Aviv, there are plans for new highways all over the city (these, for some reason, did not feature prominently in presentations by city officials). In both Haifa and Jerusalem, expensive mass transit projects have not stopped city planners from attempting to widen streets in the city center, often necessitating large-scale demolition of historic buildings.

Cars take space away from people, fill the streets with noise, pollute the air and even hit people, sometimes maiming and killing them. Cars multiply: More and more cars hit the streets every year, and this means we must provide them with new roads. Even if, as Tel Aviv's planners hope, the city's streets fill up with nonpolluting electric cars, our problems will



CONSTRUCTION IN Tel Aviv. Its tall buildings have been described as 'isolated blobs' lacking any real interaction with the street. (Ariel Jerolimski)

not be solved.

Why should we keep building our cities as if drivers' rights are sacred – especially considering that traffic problems could be easily solved with better public transportation?

City planners must choose: a city for cars, or a city for people. They can't have both.

3. Make decision-making more inclusive.

Urban decision-making is by its very nature a complex process – a balancing act between many and diverse interests, which requires endless patience and an open mind. Our mayor, a former air force officer and high school principal, tends to view decision-making as a hierarchical affair: One man gives the orders and everyone else must fall into line.

Perhaps the real test of a city's openness is how it is perceived by neighborhood activists. But ask some of the people in South Tel Aviv struggling for progress in their communities what they think of the city's decision-makers, and they will likely paint an unflattering picture. In Jaffa, as noted during one of the conference panels, an entire community is living under constant threat of eviction.

No city can be sustainable unless its communities feel that their needs matter.

4. The grass ain't greener. Israel is in the midst of a very serious water crisis. Despite reaching a compromise with the Water Authority which will allow them to continue watering parks, the country's local authorities must consider how to adapt their landscaped open spaces to the semi-arid climate.

Somehow, grassy lawns have become the default choice for yards and urban parks, despite the fact that grass is not native to this part of the world and requires huge amounts of water to survive. In Tel Aviv's new seaside parks, especially near Jaffa, entire stretches of land have become vast lawns: sod rugs stitched together over the sand, sustained by extensive sprinkler systems.

Native plants and grasses, the kind that grow naturally up and down the coastline, consume little water and can often survive without any special irrigation systems.

Landscape architects, take note.

5. Think outside the glass box.

Land is scarce, argues City Hall, and therefore our cities must densify. In practice, this translates into a disjointed skyline, with new skyscrapers popping up haphazardly wherever developers can find enough empty land. Despite stubborn opposition from residents, City Hall often sides with the developers.

However, there is already plenty of evidence that the tall buildings we are building today are more compatible with short-term profits than long-term sustainability, and add little to the functioning of the city. In his presentation, creativity guru Charles Landry described Tel Aviv's tall buildings as "isolated blobs" lacking any real interaction with the street.

Still, for economic as well as cultural reasons, skyscrapers are promoted. A plan for one of the last new neighborhoods in the north of the city is called "Manhattan on the Sea," and proposes a new "downtown" of 30-35 story buildings.

Walkable, mixed-use, human-scale neighborhoods can be just as dense (or denser, if they allocate less space to roads and parking lots) as high-rise areas, while providing a more humanizing environment. City Hall knows this – a study that it commissioned revealed no clear correlation between building heights and population density in Tel Aviv's neighborhoods.

6. Define sustainable. "Sustainability" is one of those words for which everyone has his own definition. With enough convincing, almost anything, no matter how ordinary, can be presented as "green" or "sustainable." Perhaps the time has come to formulate (with the full and equal participation, of course, of all stakeholders) a clear picture of what a truly sustainable Tel Aviv would look like.

A serious dialogue with the many green organizations and community groups that fight every day for a more sustainable and human city (and which, by the way, were not invited to take part in the conference) would be a good place to start.

The writer is an urban planner and writer based in Tel Aviv. He blogs at www.sustainablecityblog.com.

LETTERS

United we prevailed

Sir, – "Pro-Israel activists raise their voices in Geneva against Durban II" (April 23) gave the impression that the World Jewish Congress and B'nai B'rith International led Jewish efforts last week to prevent a repeat of the Durban I anti-racism conference.

However, the key to the success was the pooling of resources and joint efforts by all major Jewish organizations; the WJC and BBI were part of a coalition of nearly 20 major Jewish groups from around the world which cooperated closely under a common umbrella, the International Jewish Caucus.

The caucus shows what can be achieved if individual efforts are pooled.

MICHAEL SCHNEIDER
Secretary-General
World Jewish Congress
New York

It beats me

Sir, – Well, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad certainly underscored the lie that there wouldn't be any anti-Semitism at Durban II.

Protocol aside, it is impossible to understand how the coordinators of this conference, cognizant of his past tirades, could have put this man first on the speakers list, tucked right up next to Holocaust Remembrance Day. It is also hard to imagine how the conference could possibly be considered credible as a forum for peace when, even after the walkout by dozens of participants, many of those who remained applauded the racist speech by this crafty manipulator.

The sad part is that the plight of the Palestinians is desperate, and power-hungry despots like Ahmadinejad simply make it worse ("Ahmadinejad buries the Durban process," Gerald Steinberg, April 21).

DOUG THOMSON
Kitimat, BC, Canada

Myopia rules

Sir, – Re "Morality in neutral" (April 20): Your editorial's inability to understand why Switzerland pursues its own interests rather than Tel Aviv's is another indication of the myopia that affects so many Israelis.

When a country doesn't do your bidding, it doesn't always boil down to anti-Semitism.

G. LINDT
Berne

False echoes

Sir, – Larry Derfner accepts Caryl Churchill's assertion that "the Six Day War turned us into conquerors, made us callous toward the Palestinians and... our callousness reached a shocking new extreme during our onslaught in Gaza" ("Hearing echoes in Seven Jewish Children," April 23).

The truth is that our attitude has been shaped by the elected Palestinian leadership, which aims

for our total dismantlement; not only doesn't recognize our right to exist but will not honor past agreements; considers the indiscriminate targeting of civilians with rockets fired daily into the sovereign state of Israel an acceptable norm; and is funded by the nuclear-obsessed Mad Hatter in Iran.

If Mr. Derfner spent more time trying to convince the Palestinian leadership to break with the extremists and take a more pragmatic approach instead of bashing Israel – one of the most moral countries in the world – we would all be better off.

P. BERMAN
Shoham

Sir, – I also read that short play, and reached completely different conclusions.

Larry Derfner's justification of Caryl Churchill's basically anti-Semitic accusations only provides our enemies with ammunition.

If I wanted to read masochistic articles, I would subscribe to another newspaper.

DAVID MANDEL
Savyon

Proud of what we do

Sir, – It was interesting to read Jonathan Spyer's analysis of Conflicts Forum ("The energetic Hamas lobby," April 23).

A lobby is a paid organization. By calling us a Hamas "lobby," Spyer mistakes us as speaking on behalf of the organization or arguing its point of view. We do not: Its members are capable of articulating their own vision of the region and determining their own future.

He also implies that Conflicts Forum is paid by Hamas. We are not. The implication is, in fact, quite dangerous – since saying so means that we and those who support our work are subject to prosecution. Would Mr. Spyer like to support his statement with evidence? Spyer then describes me as a former intelligence officer. I am not and have never been.

Later on, Spyer quotes a Hamas official as saying "They [Jews] have legitimized the murder of their own children by killing the children of Palestine... They have legitimized the killing of their people all over the world by killing our people."

We are supposed to be outraged by this statement, but react calmly when Israeli supporters in the US and elsewhere issue virulent descriptions that are similar in tone and meaning.

Commentator Charles Krauthammer, for instance, says that "for Hamas, the only thing more prized than dead Jews are dead Palestinians." Is hate speech confined only to Palestinians?

Then there's this: "But as the planned Portcullis House meeting showed, Hamas possesses an experienced, well-oiled, well-funded (largely by the European taxpayer) lobby in the heart of London, in which it may take justifiable pride."

Experienced? Well-oiled? Well-

funded? Mr. Spyer sounds worried. I would like to reassure him. When he comes to Washington, he can give me a call. I'll show him what an experienced, well-oiled, and well-funded lobby really looks like. Right here, in the heart of Washington.

Spyer is right about one thing: Conflicts Forum intends to keep working for greater understanding between the leaders of the US and in Europe and political Islamist organizations.

We're proud of what we do. We intend to continue.

MARK PERRY
Conflicts Forum
Washington

Jonathan Spyer responds:

I thank Mark Perry for pointing out that he has never been an intelligence officer. The Conflicts Forum Web site describes him as a "military, intelligence and foreign affairs analyst." I have never before come across anyone who describes himself as an intelligence analyst but has no background in intelligence. (His fellow director of Conflicts Forum, Alastair Crooke, is a former MI6 officer).

Regarding his other assertions, he claims the article "implies" that Conflicts Forum is paid by Hamas; it does not. He claims that Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zahar's threat to kill Jewish children throughout the world is analogous to a claim by a US columnist that Hamas is indifferent to the fate of Palestinians. I fail to follow Mr. Perry's logic here.

He takes issue with my describing his organization as "experienced, well-oiled and well-funded." Mr. Perry, Mr. Crooke, Lord Alderdice and others associated with Conflicts Forum are certainly men of experience, with full CVs.

Regarding "well-funded," as I described, Mr. Perry's organization has been the recipient of at least one very substantial grant from the EU, which seems to justify use of this term.

Re "well-oiled" – he may have a point. Since the Portcullis House experience indicated that Mr. Perry's associates cannot operate simple video-conferencing technology successfully, I accept that this description may have been unduly charitable.

Two difficult minutes

Sir, – I was shaken by Judy Montagu's "Two minutes of silence" (April 22). It showed a depth of insight into something that cannot be encompassed.

Those two minutes of the memorial siren are like the history of the Jewish people compressed into 120 seconds. A "blank mind" during those two minutes isn't really blank – it's just trying to grapple with the inexpressible.

About Jewish affiliation, my late husband, in his love for the Jewish people, used to say:

"Even if the only thing that keeps a Jew consciously Jewish is chopped liver or herring, that's worth something."

LOTTE LAPIAN
Netanya

Priority is given to letters that are brief and topical. Letters may be edited and shortened, and must bear the name and place of residence of the writer.

letters@jpost.com

ELSEWHERE

'PC' textbooks distort Islam

In his 2008 study "Islam in the Classroom: What the textbooks tell us," Gilbert Sewall, director of the American Textbook Council (ATC), reviewed 10 of the nation's most widely used junior and senior high school history textbooks. The results should disturb anyone interested in conveying to our children a truthful history of the religion whose extreme adherents drive so many of today's tragic headlines.

Sewall found that many textbooks gloss over or delete important facts. For example, in the 1990s, "jihad" – meaning "sacred" or "holy" struggle but also "holy war" – was defined in the Houghton Mifflin junior high school book only as a struggle "to do one's best to resist temptation and overcome evil."

In discussing Shari'a law, the Islamic code that can be used to subjugate women and deal death to wayward believers, many textbooks are intentionally vague. Holt Rinehart Winston's 2006 *Medieval to Early Modern Times* junior high textbook states simply, "[Sharia] sets rewards for good behavior and punishments for crimes." Another popular history book states: "Muslim law requires that Muslim leaders offer religious toleration."

Descriptions of Islam since 9/11 are particularly dis-

turbing. Though Islamic extremism has become a fact of life throughout much of the world, most of the reviewed textbooks suggest instead that poverty, ignorance, and the existence of Israel are at the root of terrorism. The closest that any textbook gets to suggesting a faith-based component to terrorism is Glencoe's *Modern Times*, which states: "Muslims have not accommodated their religious beliefs to the modern world."

A McDougal Littell volume claims that non-Muslims in Muslim-ruled territories converted to Islam because "they were attracted by Islam's message of equality and hope for salvation." Are students asking how much of that "conversion" was coerced by the sword? Sadly, most texts gloss over Muslim leaders' history of enslavement of "infidels" and brutal treatment of women...

Sewall summed up reactions of textbook publishers to his report as "hostile," saying the pressure tactics used by some Muslim groups on publishers to portray Islam in a favorable light amounted to a kind of "cultural jihad."

– Excerpts from a piece by Gary Bauer in the Christian Science Monitor

FROM OUR ARCHIVES

65 YEARS AGO

On April 26, 1944, *The Palestine Post* reported nonstop Allied air raids on France and Germany. Also for more than a hour Flying Fortresses and Liberators dropped explosives on Ploesti and Bucharest.

President Roosevelt's statement, made at his Washington press conference, that the Palestine problem was a civilian problem which must be worked out in connection with the peace settlement, was a shock to Congressional members who supported the immigration of Jews into their homeland. Roosevelt's statement implied that the 1939 British White Paper quota would remain until the end of the war and that the doors to Palestine would remain closed. In London, the British Labor Party's report backed Jewish aims in Palestine.

In New York half a million Jew-

ish workers protested against the verdict of the Polish court-martial on alleged deserters from the Polish forces in Britain, affecting Jewish soldiers who because of anti-Semitism wished to continue to serve in the British Army. The trial was described as a slur on the Jews, and the question was asked why the anti-Semitic Polish officers had not been court-martialed instead.

The American press expressed sympathy with these Jews, emphasizing that the difficult position of the Polish government-in-exile in London had been made even more delicate by the mistreatment of Jews in the Polish armed forces. [Over 200 Polish Jewish soldiers in England was transferred into the ranks of the British Army, but this procedure was stopped by the British Home Office on the grounds that anyhow all combatants would fight the enemy together.] It was later

disclosed that some 30 Jewish soldiers were sentenced to terms of imprisonment from one to three years.

50 YEARS AGO

On April 26, 1959, *The Jerusalem Post* reported from Belgrade that four Arab delegations to the Trades Union Congress decided to boycott Congress sessions in protest against the presence of the Jewish delegation.

Beit Hagudumim, a monument to the officers and men of the Zion Mule Corps and the Jewish Battalions of Royal Fusiliers who fought with the Allies during World War I, was officially opened by the President and Mrs. Ben-Zvi at Kfar Avihayil, near Natanya.

The first convention for Oriental and Sephardi music opened at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem.

– Alexander Zvielli