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Building a Peaceful Future: A Workshop for the Old City of Jerusalem

Background

Many proposed resolutions for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict recommend a two-state solution, with Jerusalem as a shared capital region. While proposed borders vary from plan to plan, and legal control over the Old City of Jerusalem is far from agreed-upon, it is taken for granted that freedom of access to the religious sites of the Old City will be preserved. This assumption suggests that individuals will not be able to enter the Old City from one nation and exit into the other, and so turns the walls of the Old City into de facto national borders. The Geneva Accord of 2003 foresees this obstacle, and calls for the establishment of police checkpoints at the gates to the Old City.

Research

Given the densely built fabric of the Old City, the history of checkpoints in the region, and the holy nature of the site, the creation of checkpoints at the gates is problematic. Because political solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are useless unless they are physical solutions as well, any solution to the conflict must be analyzed from an environmental and architectural perspective. I propose spending the summer of 2007 in Jerusalem working on case studies of the Damascus and Dung Gates to assess the possibility of inserting humane, compassionate, and livable checkpoints into Jerusalem's urban fabric. Of special concern are the unique histories of each gate, the location of homes and places of worship in the surrounding areas, and the ability to provide appropriate access to the religious sites of Jerusalem.

Outcome

I will turn my contextual research into a curriculum for an afternoon-long workshop in which participants, working in groups, will be asked not to negotiate a political "road map," but to design the physical road. Given one of three hypothetical political scenarios, site plans of the Damascus and Dung Gates, and material addressing the site's historical context, the experience of religious pilgrimage, and contemporary security concerns, participants will be asked to design humane and secure checkpoints at one of the gates to the Old City. The design process built in to this workshop is meant to spark critical thought and discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and so the workshop should draw participants from a wide variety of educational and professional backgrounds. I will hold a minimum of three workshops in the fall of 2007. The first workshop will be held at Middlebury College, in conjunction with the Scott Center and Chaplain's Office.

In consultation with my advisor, I will be proactive in seeking out groups interested in incorporating the curriculum into their activities, art galleries able to exhibit the work resulting from the workshops, and avenues for publication such as student research journals and progressive religious magazines.

I will collect the workshop curriculum and supporting materials along with the designs resulting from the programs to create an electronic resource library that may be easily

shared over the Internet and/or through CD-ROMs. In exchange for the information I provide, I will ask that educators, researchers, and designers add the results of their work to establish a growing body of knowledge of design, Jerusalem, and the peace process.

Personal Background

As a pre-architecture student at Middlebury, I have always sought to integrate my design studio experience with my liberal arts coursework. In response to design projects situated all over the world, I have chosen to take classes in fields such as Russian Literature and Culture, Post-Colonial Literature, and the Early Middle East. As a result of these cross-curricular experiences, I routinely use economic studies, historical documents, and social analyses as source material for my architectural designs. The interdisciplinary approach I intend to take towards the challenge of the Old City checkpoints is an extension of both my natural inclinations and my academic strengths.

My workshop proposal has developed organically from a project undertaken in sophomore-year Introduction to Architectural Design, and I have come back to it time and again not only because of the intellectual challenges it poses, but also because of my personal connection to the subject matter. My great-grandfather moved his family to Israel in the 1930's, and I was born fifty years later in the city of Kfar Saba. Over the years, my extended family has moved back and forth between Israel and the United States several times, and so I have grown up as an Israeli citizen, but an American Jew. This personal history has instilled within me a deep love for the land of Israel. As I've grown older, this love has been transformed by the education I've received at Middlebury into a desire for a homeland of which I can be proud, and a willingness to work to make it so. By combining my strong background in interdisciplinary research with a sense of compassion and personal responsibility, I will be able to create a thoughtful and dynamic workshop experience.

Middlebury Connections

The idea for this proposal was generated in a uniquely Middlebury course, J-term Introduction to Architectural Design. With the support of Professors Parker Croft, Pieter Broucke, Tamar Mayer, Febe Armanios, and Glenn Andres, Middlebury College Museum of Art Chief Curator Emmie Donadio, and Nina Robinson, '06, a few lines sketched on a page has become a project which presents a new and creative way of addressing an old, persistent challenge. Associate Chaplain Ira Schiffer will be advising my research, and I look forward to having Middlebury students as participants in the first workshop I lead early next fall.

Conclusion

A workshop addressing the division of the City of Jerusalem asks its participants to test their idealism against political and physical realities. A participatory and pragmatic approach to educating about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has great potential to calm fears, challenge hopes, and create new avenues of possibility for peace.