

## **CULTURE, PLACE AND REGION: THE MOUNT OF OLIVES IN JERUSALEM**

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### **Introduction.**

Each place on earth is unique. The composition of factors that forms this uniqueness differs from place to place. Physical and human factors interact to give form to a place over time.

Geological and climatological processes shape the surface of the earth and humankind is attracted to utilize it.

The Mount of Olives is a unique place on this earth. It is the ridge that differentiates the Mediterranean region from the desert. To the west lies the Old City of Jerusalem, the Mediterranean sea, southern Europe, North Africa and the Atlantic; to the east the Judean Hills, Jericho, the Jordan Valley, the Arabian desert and the fertile crescent.

The geological formation here made burial underground possible. A single spring sustained life.

Over thousands of years the sacred city of Jerusalem was built, destroyed, then rebuilt. The Mount of Olives viewed the ancient city and over time has remained unbuilt and open. The three monotheistic religions observe the mountain as a sacred place. For Judaism it is the viewing place of the Temple. Christians revere it as the place where Mary is buried, Jesus conversed with his disciples, prayed over the city, and shed a tear looking at Jerusalem; from this arena he ascended to heaven. Myth hovers over the mountain.

The place attracts believers, pilgrims and tourists from all over the world. It has been doing so for thousands of years. Probably no other place on this planet is sacred to three religions. The place serves for prayer, for burial, for living.

The eventual arena for the last judgment on doomsday dramatically intensifies the significance of the place. It attracts the will to live, visit and die here. It is seldom that physical form, history, religion and culture so powerfully interact to create a place. However, all places have their unique components which single them out as different, as special. The regional composition of culture is the sum of all of its components.

The Mount of Olives is singular, it is a metaphor for any other place. To prepare a plan for such a place is a tremendous challenge for an architect. The notion of a client and a user gains a different meaning than in any other project. The program has many dimensions and the scope of the plan encompasses different expanses of time. In its extremities and complexities the mountain points towards a deeper meaning in architecture and environmental design.

Reality and abstraction interact in graphic documents that construct the image of a place.

The centrality of this unique place is demonstrated in this world map from a medieval manuscript. The world is a circular disc. Rivers and seas separate continents - Asia, Africa and Europe and Jerusalem in the center.

In this sixteenth-century print, the topography of the mountain, composed of three peaks approached by three paths, represents myth, belief and location. The paths associate places with major events which occurred on the mountain. The artist has captured the essentials of the place, the Kidron river and the bridge at the bottom, the olive orchards that gave the mountain its name, the physical expression of the three peaks, and the contour line of the ridge which interfaces earth and sky.

## Textures express intentions.

Judaism cherishes the Mount of Olives as the sacred cemetery. A cultural history is hidden between the stone graves. For Christianity the mountain is a place for prayer, contemplation, and a site for pilgrimage. The bell tower suggests visual and acoustic dominance. An Arab-Islamic village brings everyday life to the mountain. Each human condition has a distinctly different physical expression. Although each form is complete and independent, it is the combination of the three that gives the place its uniqueness.

The shape of land and topography, limestone land formations erode in the rain and create valleys, plateaus and ridges. The high plateaus are a natural place for the construction of edifices and housing. The ridges and steep slopes overlook the Old City.

The mountain between east and west does not repose in symmetry. From the west and the Mediterranean comes the rain. To the east lies the desert. Geological layers are tilted, thus the western slopes get rain and on eastern slopes water comes from springs. The landscape to the west is green and fertile; to the east it is arid. This geologic, geographic and topographic situation is the context for a unique form.

The soft limestone layers attract usage of a unique nature. Stone is extracted for construction of houses and the newly created underground space can be used for burial. A dichotomy is created, the living Old City of Jerusalem on the plateau is viewed by the necropolis on the Mount of Olives to the east. Prophets, saints and dignitaries, as well as ordinary citizens, are among the approximately 100,000 people from three religions that are buried in the mountain. The drawing shows the Piazza and the steps leading underground to Mary's Tomb on the lower section of the cross.

The sacred places for Islam and Judaism - the Temple Mount and Harem esh-Shariff are not the highest points but on a plateau which can be observed from the mountains above it, the Mount of Olives and several other hills. Topography frames content and visual links accentuate meaning.

Three dimensionality activates space and establishes a symbolic dialogue between slopes.

Contrast accentuates mass and void. The Old City of Jerusalem is one of the most compact and continuously built-up urban forms. The Temple Mount is a clearly defined open space with free-standing edifices: the Mount of Olives is open to natural landscape, topography and the distant views to the city and beyond. Interaction between them contrasts and signifies the unique content of each.

The olive tree gives its name to this place. The life of the tree spans millennia. The eight olive trees of Gethsemane were probably there when Jesus visited this place. Each tree is different, yet they all correspond to the rules of the dialogue between living organisms and the surrounding conditions. Olives, palms, pomegranates, figs, grapes, barley and wheat form the typical vegetation of the region and give a unique visual character to the mountain.

Edges create space. Six Arab villages have emerged over time to define the space and visual openness of the mountain. The Old City and the Temple Mount together with the villages physically border the mountain and frame its content both natural and human-made. The presence of sites and buildings on the mountain is accentuated by these edges. This is not only a physical definition, the dynamics associated with the villages contribute to the life of the mountain, they require special control and protection.

Interaction between the surface of the earth, the sky and the human-made objects is multi-faceted. The bell tower projects into the sky with self-assertiveness; monumental tombs are both part of the rock and emerge from it. Burial caves are almost invisible, to remind us that there is much more to a place than what can be seen.

## Conclusion.

The essence of a site is composed of the particular combination of its components. The Mount of Olives, through its uniqueness, demonstrates the validity of this approach. The span of time conceived for the plan of each site reflects the permanence versus the dynamism of a place. Some places, like the Mount of Olives, should be planned for permanence. The "foreverness" of a plan expresses intentions which are implicit to a site. Thus culture, place and region are notions that are two-directional. They reflect the past and they form the future; they express the "in-ness" of the place and they project it to broader regions.