



# Celebrating diversity over divisiveness

In Jerusalem, art has a crucial role to play in creating a city that embraces pluralism and fights intolerance

**IN THE** polarized atmosphere of present-day Israel, art and culture have become the focal point of a heated debate, a battleground of clashing political ideologies, social inequity and economic disparity.

The battle is raising acute questions of freedom of artistic expressions, its limits, its critical role in maintaining our democratic values, the legal intricacies related to its rapport with public funding, and more.

Artists and cultural institutions find themselves at the forefront of this debate, often without planning or wanting to be there. And, as always, in Jerusalem, the microcosm of Israeli society, these issues have additional layers and the debate is further enhanced.

Revered for its rich history, holy sites, beauty and spirituality, Jerusalem boasts a vibrant cultural scene. But much has changed since the city's heyday as the country's center of academia and culture in the 1980s.

The Israel Museum, Mishkenot Sha'ananim, the Jerusalem Cinémathèque, the Kahn Theater, the Tower of David Museum, the Science Museum, the Jerusalem Music Center, the Vertigo Dance Company, the Sam Spiegel Film and TV School, the Yellow Submarine, the Train Theater, the International Writers Festival, the Zoological Gardens, the Israel Festival – these are but a few of the dozens of flagship cultural institutions developed by the late Teddy Kollek during his momentous 28 years as mayor of Jerusalem from 1965 to 1993. “The Mayor of Mayors,” Teddy also founded the Jerusalem Foundation, which, in addition to enabling this cultural renaissance, steered forth

dozens of community, education and coexistence projects.

But being at the symbolic and arguably actual epicenter of the Arab-Israeli conflict, beleaguered by deadly terrorist attacks and violent hostilities, strained by religious tensions and economic disparity, the capital – home of the Knesset, the government, the Supreme Court, the central bank, the Hebrew University and numerous other national institutions – has undergone critical demographic shifts that have deeply affected its character, and Jerusalem is struggling.

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The demographics of the largest city in Israel tell its story best: 190,000 ultra-Orthodox (very large families, most of the men studying Torah full-time, living off social and welfare services, not participating in the economic fabric of the city); 270,000 Arabs (very large families, a number of which are separated by the security wall from their families and businesses in the Palestinian Authority, at odds with Israeli lifestyle and

identity); 450,000 secular and religious or traditional Israelis (mostly low- to middle-class, government employees, service professionals and small-business owners).

Recent years have witnessed highly dedicated and equally motivated young activists establishing grassroots organizations such as Hit'orerut (Awakening) and Ruah Hadasha (New Spirit), which are impressively committed to the city, immersed in the intersection of art, community and urban renewal.

Still, while more than 30,000 students study in Jerusalem, among them 6,000 in some of the world's best art academies, many leave the city upon graduation, opting to follow their dreams and build their lives elsewhere. The next generation above them, the 30-50 year olds, has already left. And the one above, torn as it is by doing so, often follows to be closer to the grandchildren.

And so, we find ourselves, 50 years after the reunification of the city in 1967, with one of the most diversified and, at the same time, polarized and fragmented cities in Israel, and among its poorest.

But with its 3,000 years of history, the city seemingly shrugs it off, unphased, treading along confidently. It has seen it all: faith, fanaticism and coexistence; Abraham. Jesus and Muhammad; wars and conquests; kings and prophets; loves and revelations. Time here moves at a different pace.

Upon taking office eight years ago, Mayor Nir Barkat identified art and culture as central to the development of the city as a dynamic, modern, pluralistic cosmopolitan metropolis. The Creative Class, a term



introduced by renowned urban studies theorist Richard Florida, was embraced by Barakat as integral to his comprehensive efforts to revitalize the economy, encourage industry and entrepreneurship, boost tourism, advance education and empower community.

These are high expectations and heavy responsibilities to entrust in the hands of cultural organizations, art schools, performing ensembles and independent artists. Yet, Jerusalem artists and art managers, passionate about the city they love despite the challenges it presents, step up to the plate and continue to hold on to the city with steadfast determination. And they thrive. Political, religious and social complexities admittedly make for great art.

But art in Jerusalem is never merely just art.

While the various communities often live in close proximity of one another, they don't really mingle. Some streets in Jerusalem can have a Jewish population at one end and Palestinian residents at the other, yet they will never meet. Except for the unique and inspiring Israeli-Arab bilingual school, students attend different schools, families frequent different community centers and, while the various communities will shop at the same malls or encounter one another in administrative offices or hospitals, these remain service-oriented encounters.

Cultural activities thus become critical platforms for dialogue and encounter of "the other" as a person. From the YMCA Israeli-Arab Youth Choir, to Maale Film School workshops for Haredi women, to the School

of Visual Theater's work with people with disabilities, Jerusalem artists are engaged in art as a stimulating meeting point.

The late Lia Van Leer, founder of the Jerusalem Cinémathèque and the Israel Film Archive, loved cinema with all her heart, no less for the art of it than for its ability to transport us to foreign worlds and present "the other." She would passionately stand up to anyone who attempted to place boundaries on art.

**LIKEWISE, WHILE** striving for artistic excellence, originality and innovation are the primary core values of the Israel Festival – its success is not measured by merely entertaining, moving and inspiring. The festival, now in its 56th year, endeavors to also challenge, stretch borders, provide new perspectives and trigger a spirited dialogue. Hosting leading artists from around the world and engaging emerging and established Israeli artists, the Israel Festival provides an important platform for intercultural encounter and dialogue.

In the complex, often strenuous reality of daily life in Jerusalem, which is burdened by real and symbolic conflicting political and religious interests and interest groups, art raises the flag of artistic freedom, educating toward tolerance and recognizing the other.

We are miffed by those who argue in favor of academic or cultural boycotts, for they raise barriers rather than dissolve them. We are equally at odds with any attempt to confine, suppress or censure, for we deeply believe that creative expression is critical to

the functioning of democratic societies.

But Jerusalem artists not only raise the flag of artistic freedom, they raise the flag of artistic excellence. That they go hand in hand is only revealed when defied.

New theatrical languages, social and cultural contemplation, blurring of the boundaries between disciplines and new, surprising viewer perspectives – the Israel Festival and other Jerusalem cultural institutions and artists present art that is in search of its own expression and independence in the face of the present zeitgeist in which we live – the ever exacerbating social and economic divide, nationalistic extremism and terrorism, the erosion of fundamental democratic values and artistic freedom of expression, technological advancement alongside utter helplessness in the face of the forces of nature, and unprecedented access to information and the ethical questions that come with it.

In working to contribute to the character of Jerusalem as a dynamic, modern, pluralistic city, we do not compare it to other cities, but rather we measure it against what we envision it can and should be. We do what we do because we yearn for and believe in a city that celebrates diversity over divisiveness; a city that embraces pluralism and fights intolerance; a city that acts as a cultural promoter for a more peaceful society. In this beloved city, art is a venture that builds bridges. ■

*Eyal Sher is the director general of the Israel Festival. He was previously the director of the Art and Culture Department of the Jerusalem Foundation*