

Ronald Storrs – Orientalist in Jerusalem

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Storrs in Jerusalem: reconstruction of the biblical city

Ronald Storrs, governor of Jerusalem from 1918 to 1927, played a decisive role in designing the face of ancient and modern Jerusalem, and his endeavors in the city command a great deal of esteem in studies on the preservation and development of the city and its culture during the British Mandate. Storrs will be remembered, inter alia, in the history of modern Jerusalem for issuing the ordinance whereby the city's buildings will be covered with Jerusalem stone – a tradition that reinforces the character of the city to this day.

Storrs was appointed governor of Jerusalem several days after the city was taken by General Allenby. During his walks through the city, as he describes in detail in his memoirs which relate to his visit to the city immediately after its conquest,¹ Storrs witnessed the distress of the residents and carefully provided their needs as quickly as possible. Providing food, water, and sanitation were the first things he did as

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the city's military governor.² However, only weeks after the conquest, Storrs began to focus on the city itself, its landscape and buildings, and its importance as the Holy City.

In his book Storrs describes at great length the places he regards as important, the views that he saw – both natural and built-up – and the reciprocal relationship between the city and its residents. It appears that Storrs, guided in his tours by the Holy Scriptures from which he quotes incessantly, had a clear-cut picture of the city's appropriate appearance which he sought to reconstruct and eternalize. Storrs, like many of his compatriots, envisioned a local biblical urban setting. He praises the biblical landscapes, for example: “from Olivet across the Kedron to the North East corner of the Temple, memories from Francis glinted from the golden pinnacles of Gethsemane ... from Olivet through the Kedron to the North East corner of the Temple.”³ The city walls, its gates and towers, are his favorite views, the sites that he tours and to which he brings his guests.

Jerusalem of the early 20th century spread far beyond the walls of the Old City. However, the new neighborhoods outside the walls are hardly mentioned in Storrs' writing. Moreover, he finds numerous examples of later building worthy of condemnation, and levels bitter criticism at the construction that diverts from the local idyllic vision: “The fifty previous years of unchecked religious exploitation had already hidden or thrown out of scale most of the ancient northern and western walls, by the building hard against them of colossal and hideous convents and monasteries.”⁴ And later, “A discerning conqueror in 1850 could have established the shops, convents and hotel well away from the old City and have left the gray ramparts

in a setting of green, olives and cypresses.”⁵ No doubt, any future development of Jerusalem should take the landscape into account. This principle is blatantly manifested in Storrs’ response to an earlier proposal for modern development: “... and I found a positive pleasure in replying to a request for a concession to run trams to Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives, that the first rail section would be laid over the dead body of the Military Governor.”⁶

It appears that Storrs sized up and investigated the city’s population in the same manner. He perceived the traditional Moslem residents as the original population. His attitude toward their way of life and artisanship was forgiving and sympathetic. On the other hand, he regarded the Jewish population, including members of the old *Yishuv* as well as the newly-arrived Zionists, as foreign to the landscape. These Jerusalem residents were incompatible with his image of the fitting character of the city.

In fact, with regard to the relationship between the residents and their surroundings, Storrs seems to have preferred a city devoid of inhabitants: “I had been there but a few weeks when I was aware of a tendency to demolish the interesting and the beautiful and to substitute for them the cheapest and most immediate commonness in design or material that could be procured.”⁷ Storrs describes his role as a police officer who is forced to chase after young people cutting down the city’s trees,⁸ or a building contractor carrying Roman stones away from Siloam. These descriptions highlight the gap between his self-perception as protector of the city, the man in charge of rehabilitating its treasures and continually preserving them, and the needs and way of life of its inhabitants.

Storrs as an Orientalist

Storrs' descriptions of Jerusalem present the picture of an arch-representative of the British government in Palestine in general, and Jerusalem in particular, which beyond imperialistic interest in Palestine, presented a deep religious interest in ruling the Holy Land.⁹ As Shepherd claims, the British had intimate knowledge of Palestine in comparison with other countries in their empire. Continual mapping of the country, a desire to give authentic support to the biblical stories, and an evangelical yearning vis-à-vis the future of the Jews – all inspired British visitors and missionaries from the 19th century onward. Over the years, the paternalistic interest which the country aroused was an incentive for British travelers and explorers, until they were replaced in 1917 by soldiers and officials.¹⁰ Indeed, when Storrs describes the landscape of Jerusalem, he imagines himself as the heir of a long and magnificent dynasty of rulers of the Holy Land. He compares the welcome of the British conquerors to that of Alexander the Great in the same country.¹¹

This attitude toward Jerusalem and its inhabitants resulted in Edward Said calling Storrs “a British Orientalist agent,” in other words, an office-holder whose authoritarian role enabled him to demonstrate his Oriental expertise. Storrs' personal viewpoint manifests local proficiency based on years of experience in the oriental countries.¹² In Egypt, Storrs learned to love Eastern art and culture, and was even appointed to membership of a committee founded to protect Cairo's important Islamic edifices. As a member of this committee he learned to love Medieval Islamic Cairo and became a tour guide for friends and guests. Ben-Arieh believes that “There is no doubt that medieval

ancient Jerusalem, within the walls, reminded Storrs of his beloved Cairo, particularly since its historical-religious past was added to it.”¹³ In Jerusalem, as an “orientalist agent” Storrs enjoyed special status, whereby he acted and recommended public policies.¹⁴ It seems that Storrs enjoyed a rare opportunity to leave his mark on Jerusalem and its development, and thus exert his personal influence over the course of history of the Orient.

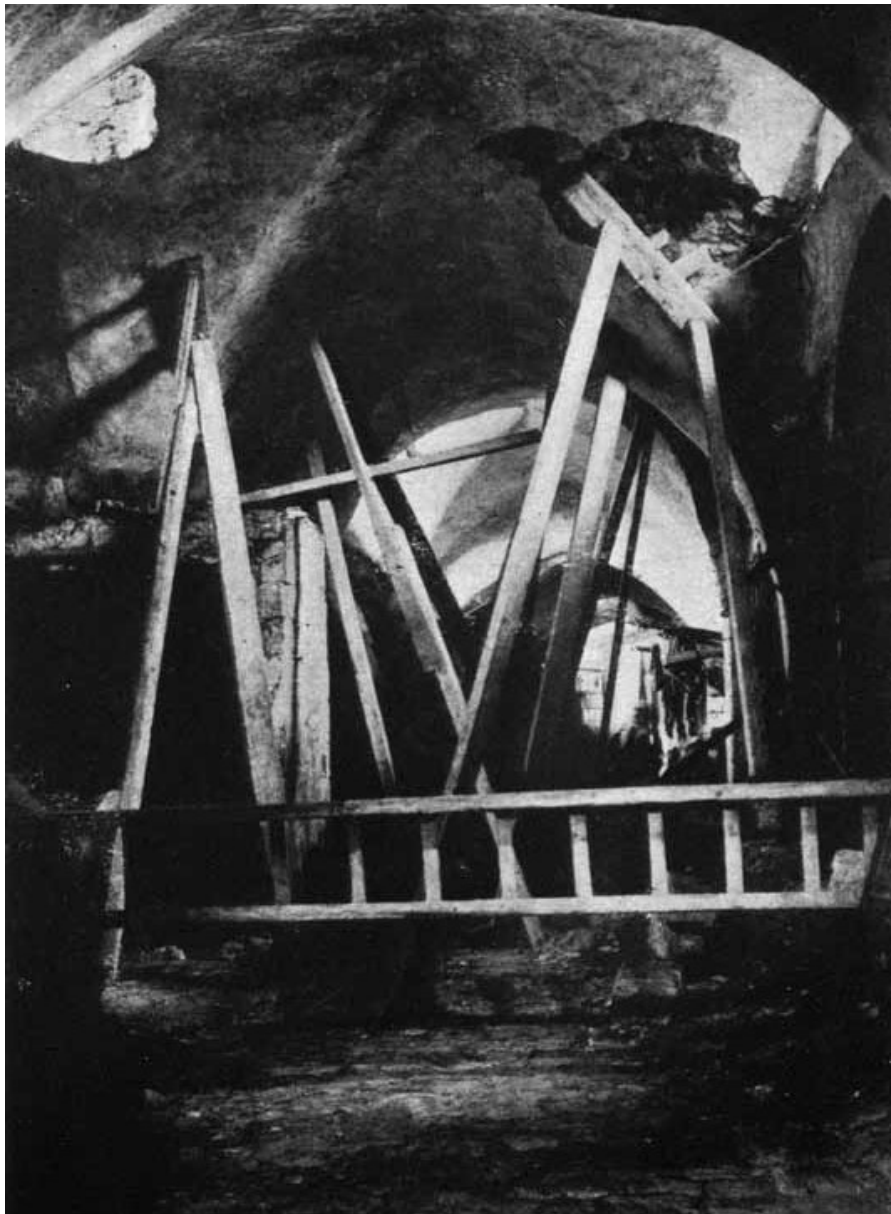
The principle of status quo in relation to building in the city, which Storrs was strict in implementing, is an important manifestation of the way in which he sought to immortalize the situation of Jerusalem in the 20th century; but its violation can also show signs of his deep belief. Storrs speaks of two instances in which he violated the status quo with regard to building: the first, to his discontent, was when he was forced to approve the building of a new church in Gethsemane; the second, when he gave orders to remove an ornamental curtain installed by the Orthodox Church in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.¹⁵

On the other hand, as a man of culture, Storrs sought to bestow upon the residents of Jerusalem the best of Western culture, and hence founded a music club in the city, opened a public reading room, founded a chess club, held musical evenings open to the public, founded a music school, and so forth.¹⁶ His public policy was applied without delay and directly in his municipal activity in Jerusalem through city planning, and less officially through his activity in the Pro-Jerusalem Society, which he co-founded with the city’s residents. Charles Robert Ashbee, the official town planner and secretary of the Society, and Storrs’ right-hand man in his first years in Jerusalem, was the one who implemented his policy.

Storrs, Ashbee and the Pro-Jerusalem Society

Several British planners were active in Jerusalem during Storrs' term of office. Storrs was personally responsible for the official assignment of Ashbee, the second planner.¹⁷ Charles Robert Ashbee (1854-1932), artist and architect, was active in the Arts and Crafts movement, whose objective was to rehabilitate the arts and crafts of ordinary people. In his work, Ashbee sought to combine the needs of a modern city with those of a traditional society. During World War I, the unemployed Ashbee became a teacher of English and sports in Cairo. Like Storrs before him, the city impressed him deeply, and in it he saw the embodiment of a traditional society which preserved its unique style before modern industry would corrupt it. In his diaries he lauded the local craftsmen and was regretful that the medieval city was disappearing as a result of the modern way of life. Ashbee's diaries and memoirs, which he wrote years later, show a perception similar to the urban and social landscape of Jerusalem. Like Storrs, Ashbee also aspired to protect traditional Jerusalem, and in his writing criticized foreign building that demonstrated styles that were not local, which impaired the local, ancient landscape and the gems of the city. He was opposed to using cheap building materials that replaced the traditional ones, bewailed the city's neglect, and praised the local Moslem residents who, in their indolence did well not to change a thing.¹⁸

The collaboration between Storrs and Ashbee was both successful and productive. Their common objective, as it was manifested in the endeavors of the Society, and documented in the two splendid volumes which relate the Society's history, was to preserve the appearance of



A notice in the daily Mirror regarding the riots at Jaffa Gate
The The Armenian pottery workshop "The Tiles of the Dome of
the Rock Workshop", Jerusalem, 1922

Library of Congress, American Colony Collection

סדנת הקרמיקה הארמנית "אריחי כיפת הסלע", ירושלים, 1922

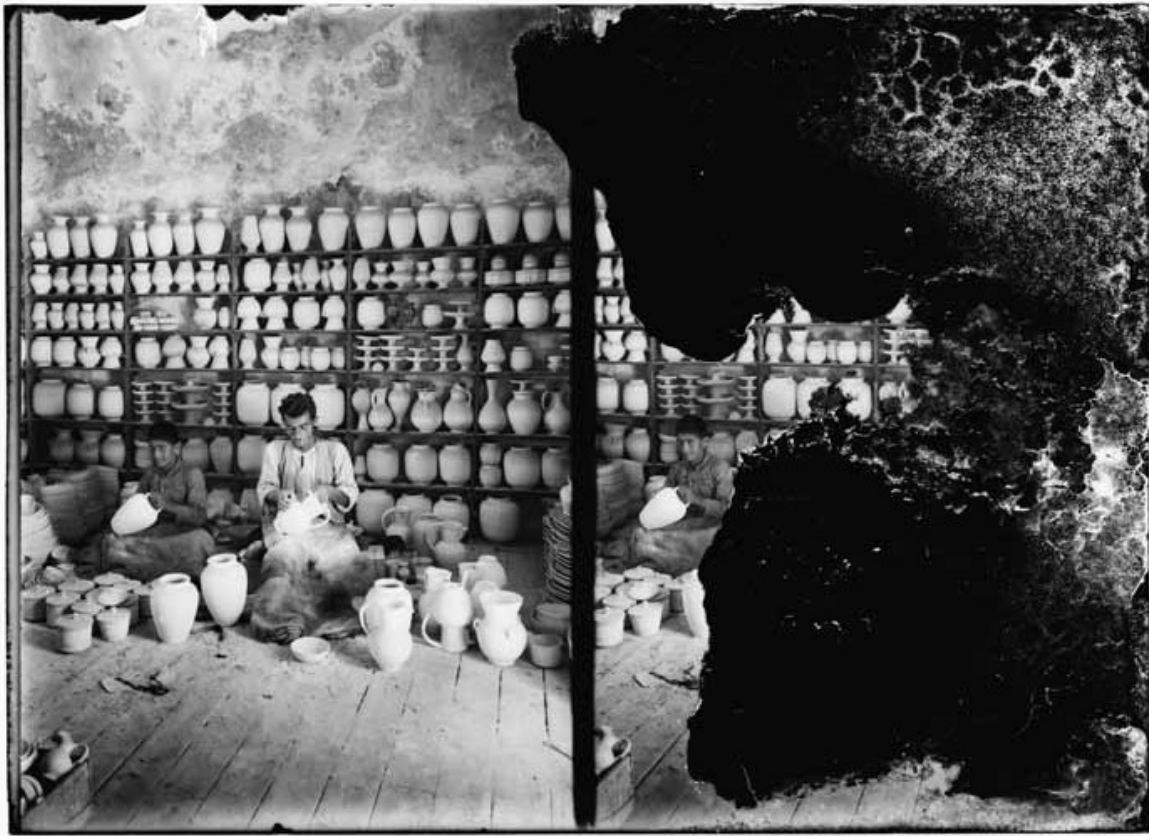
ספריית הקונגרס, אוסף אמריקן קולוני

the city, thus protecting and preserving its antiquities, and to encourage local arts, crafts and industry.¹⁹ On the Society's initiative, historical and archeological surveys, which dealt with Jewish culture, Roman, Crusader, and Moslem monuments, were conducted throughout the city. In addition, in Ashbee's surveys throughout the city – reminiscent of the spirit of Storrs' writing – he described some 50 types of traditional crafts, among them: metal and copper, color and seal engravings, silversmithing, textile and dye, clothing and needlework, clay, pottery and mosaics, printing and writing, building musical instruments. Of these he chose three crafts for rehabilitation: ceramic tiles, Hebron glassblowing, and cotton weaving.²⁰

Ashbee rehabilitated the art of ceramic tiling to restore the tiles on the Dome of the Rock. Ironically, he could not find expert craftsmen in Palestine for this traditional craft, and was forced to bring in a family from a small village in Turkey. The workshop, headed by the head of the family, David Ohanessian, was extremely successful (as Ashbee described in the Society records²¹), and Storrs also used its products to decorate the chapel he dedicated to his family.²²

The Hebron glassblowing craft, which Storrs had discovered earlier in Cairo, and its ancient origins in Hebron, was rehabilitated, albeit with only partial success.²³ Ashbee relates how he assembled several elderly artists who were no longer working, and in his 1921 report to the Society described their work at the home of the High Commissioner, who wished to furnish his house with the work of local craftsmen.²⁴

In the weaving workshop, using looms brought in by the American Red Cross, Ashbee and Storrs resolved the local rehabilitation of one of the Old City's ancient markets, the cotton market: "This fine medieval



he Perfume Market before its reconstruction, circa 1920

From: C. R. Ashbee (editor), *Jerusalem, 1918-1920: being the records of the Pro-Jerusalem Council during the period of the British military Administration*, London: p.

שוק הבשמים לפני שיפוצו, 1920 בערך

bazaar had degenerated through neglect into a public latrine. The shops were filled with ordure, the debris was sometimes lying five feet high, and the picturesque doors had been broken up for firewood by the Turks. We restored the vaults, roofing, and the walls of the Suq, put in looms, and by the close of the first year were employing, on a self-supporting basis, some seventy people.”²⁵



Ronald Storrs in the company of apprentice weavers at the opening ceremony of the weaving workshop.

Library of Congress, American Colony Collection

רונלד סטורס בחברת שוליות-האורגים בעת טקס פתיחת סדנת האריגה

ספריית הקונגרס, אוסף אמריקן קולוני

Patrick Geddes and planning the new city

The most important tool at Storrs' disposal in designing Jerusalem was modern urban planning, which had become an official legal procedure in Britain less than a decade earlier. The first local planning law was passed in 1921. Indeed, in the second volume of the Society's records, Ashbee mentioned that urban planning was one of the Society's greatest achievements, despite the fact that planning had never been one of its official roles.²⁶ As early as 1918, engineer William McLean submitted the first plan for Jerusalem, but it was received with harsh criticism and it may well be that it was the pretext for Ashbee's immediate appointment. Patrick Geddes, a renowned Scottish town planner who came to Palestine after working extensively throughout the British Empire, submitted an additional plan for the city in 1919.

Geddes arrived in Jerusalem in 1919 following an invitation sent by the Zionist Commission which requested that he plan the Hebrew University, whose permit had just been issued. Geddes and Ashbee had known one another for a long time. Geddes, who appreciated Ashbee's work, was also invited to join the Society's meetings when he was in the city. The Zionist Commission decided to make use of Geddes' presence in Jerusalem, and asked him to present his comments on McLean's plan; at the same time, so Geddes claims, Storrs himself handed him McLean's plan and promised his support for any improvement he deemed fit to propose.²⁷ Ultimately Geddes submitted his own plan.

Geddes also regarded Jerusalem as a biblical entity meriting rehabilitation, and his plan combined many more components than Ashbee's earlier proposals. They both regarded the Old City and its

environs as a municipal asset with high aesthetic and archeological value. Their plans banned any building east of the Old City, in the only part of the city that still preserved – according to Geddes – the original biblical landscape in the form of terraces and olive trees.²⁸ Geddes proposed to continue isolating the Old City from the west by encircling it with a green belt dotted with ancient graves, tombstones, and pools, called The Holy Park of Jerusalem.²⁹ The city walls and David's Citadel were regarded as the most significant edifices that attested to the city's character; Ashbee and Storrs invested a great deal of effort in uncovering and preserving them. The citadel, which served the Turkish army and housed numerous refugees after the war, was in need of a thorough cleaning, thus evacuating it of its residents, and rehabilitating buildings and vaults. Over the years of its activity this was the main thrust of the Society's rehabilitation efforts. The towers were cleaned and prepared for use. The rampart was restored to its original condition.³⁰

A great deal of value was attached to rehabilitation of the city walls. Thirty private building additions, which obstructed passage, were removed. The gates were rehabilitated and the guard houses reopened. The square adjacent to the Jaffa and Damascus Gates was given special attention; unnecessary buildings were removed, and in their place Ashbee proposed building new markets reminiscent of the traditional khan. In addition, Geddes demanded the removal buildings from the wall that impaired its ancient appearance, among them the Turkish clock tower.³¹ On the other hand, he sought to reestablish significant urban elements, among them the moat that surrounded the Old City and the Wall, part of which was removed in 1898 to enable Kaiser Wilhelm II's ride into the city.³² In the second volume of the Society's

report, which summarized its 1920-22 activities, Ashbee reported on the completion of the evacuation and rehabilitation of the Wall, and on its becoming an urban promenade. Storrs describes this in his book: “The Psalms of David and a cloud of unseen witnesses seemed to inspire our work. ‘Build ye the Walls of Jerusalem’. We put back the fallen stones, the finials, the pinnacles and the battlements, and we restored and freed from numberless encroachments and medieval Ramparts, so that it was possible to ‘Walk about Zion and go round about the towers thereof: mark well her bulwarks, set up her houses.’”³³

Thus, the isolated Old City became the urban focal point in Ashbee and Geddes’ plans, the nucleus of the development of the entire city, in both appearance and essence. The vigorous activities to clean the citadel and the walls, as well as the moat, contributed a great deal to accentuating the walls within the urban scene. Development of the new city was carried out to the west. In his plans, Geddes insisted that more than any other city, Jerusalem should develop according to its ancient nucleus.³⁴ He rejected the strict grids that McLean had proposed in his plan in favor of the natural development of a setup of streets based on the existing historical roads.³⁵ Consequently, Ashbee’s 1921 plan was based on the proposed routes, and important additional elements were mainly historical remnants and religious edifices. In fact, the primary innovation of his plan was setting the city’s boundaries in accordance with five Arab villages that surrounded it. In fact, this plan, which later became law, rendered Geddes’ main proposals permanent, as well as Storrs and Ashbee’s similar outlook. The urban plan, as well as several plans for public buildings and new city neighborhoods which were submitted separately, including recommendations for using traditional

components in any future building, reflect the common vision of Ashbee, Geddes, and Storrs of the old-new biblical city.

Geddes and Ashbee: contradictions in planning

However, unlike Storrs and Ashbee who praised local Islamic culture and regarded it as a lever for local development, Geddes' Orientalist interpretation of local rejuvenation gave preference to ancient Jewish culture, claiming that it played an essential role in local renewal. Geddes admired the Zionist society in Palestine and regarded it a modern Return to Zion. In his work in Jerusalem he sought to restore the ancient Kingdom of Israel and all its social and urban components, in the vein of restoring it to its former glory.³⁶

Two plans submitted by Ashbee and Geddes for the development of a particularly sensitive area in the Old City – between the Western Wall and the Dung Gate – attest to their different approaches to the city's different populations and their objectives. Geddes, who envisioned the good of the Jewish residents, sought to improve access to the Western Wall, even at the expense of the Moslem inhabitants; in the Mughrabi Quarter, adjacent to the Western Wall, he proposed demolishing a group of “vulgar and unsuitable” buildings and replacing them with other buildings outside the Dung Gate. Geddes claimed that this would make for a vital environmental improvement: “with the removal of a single row of houses, and with the acquirement of the small garden at the north end, the length of the Wailing-Wall will be about doubled, and the space in front of it sufficiently increased”³⁷ He argued that on the area vacated it would be possible to build a staircase which would

not depend on the existing steep slope or on hostile neighbors; it would also be possible to build proper houses, “hopefully – Jewish”.³⁸

In one plan in particular, Ashbee, who sought to achieve the welfare of all the inhabitants, demonstrated a great lack of sensitivity toward the Jewish population. In addition to the city’s reservoirs which he proposed turning into swimming pools, he also saw fit to propose building a municipal stadium within the Old City, inside Dung Gate, where it was believed that the Roman theatre that conducted sporting activities stood. The plan included a football ground and a running track, as well as a tennis court at the square which would be created on the façade of the Western Wall. These plans, which attest to Ashbee and Geddes’ different approaches, reflect more than anything the different aspects of local Orientalism.

Epilogue

Geddes continued to work in Palestine for the Mandate government and his Zionist employers until 1925. Contrary to his plans for the Hebrew University, which were prepared for the Zionist Commission but were all rejected, his plan for Jerusalem was almost completely incorporated into Ashbee’s plans that were accepted two years later. Ashbee himself resigned all his positions in March 1922, claiming that preference was given to the Jews in the planning of Jerusalem. Storrs left the country in 1926 and a short time later the Pro-Palestine Society broke up.

The contribution of Ronald Storrs, Charles Ashbee and the Pro-Palestine Society was extensive and its fruits can still be seen today: David Ohanessian, the Armenian craftsman, opened an independent

and successful workshop; the walls of the city remained a promenade, and its citadels have become a museum of the city's history. Storrs' vision of the city became permanent in the preservation of the Old City and the rehabilitation of its crafts on the one hand, and in the conservative planning of the new city, on the other.

The specific plans of Geddes and Ashbee were not implemented; their quiet rejection attests to Storrs' professional considerations and political pragmatism. However, Storrs' basic Orientalist approach to Jerusalem, as manifested in Geddes and Ashbee's proposals for the city's development, and as it was officially accepted in Ashbee's 1921 plan, dictates the shape and development of the city to the present day. In 1967 all the buildings adjacent to the city walls and the Old City were demolished. The Old City was surrounded by a park, in accordance with a proposal dating from the days of Storrs. The Old City remained a visual and ideational focal point of Jerusalem, and all the city's plans relate to it accordingly.

- 1 Ronald Storrs, *The Memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs*. Freeman Press.
- 2 Y. Ben-Arieh, "Activity for the preservation and planning of Jerusalem at the beginning of the British government in Palestine, 1917-1926", in: R. Aharonson, H. Lavesky (ed.) *A Country as Reflected in its Past: Studies in the Historical Geography of Palestine*, Jerusalem. Magnes Press, Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi, 2001, pp. 441-500. [Hebrew].
- 3 See note 1, *ibid*, p. 353.
- 4 *Ibid*, p. 326.
- 5 *Ibid*, p. 331.
- 6 *Ibid*, p.326.

- 7 Ibid, p. 326.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 N. Shepherd, *Plowing Sand: British Rule in Palestine 1917-1948*, London, John Murray. Albemarle Street 2000, p.7.
- 10 Ibid, ibid.
- 11 See note 1, ibid.
- 12 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishing Co., 2000: pp. 174-175; 210-217 [Hebrew].
- 13 See note 2, ibid, pp. 441-500.
- 14 See note 12, ibid, p. 210.
- 15 See note 1, ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ashbee's diaries, quoted in N. Heisler-Rubin, "Planning of the artistic city: Charles Robert Ashbee in Jerusalem," *Katedra*, 117, 2006, pp. 81-102 [Hebrew].
- 19 C. R. Ashbee (ed.) *Jerusalem, 1918-1920: Being the Records of the Pro-Jerusalem Council during the period of the British Military Administration*, London: J. Murray for the Council of the Pro-Jerusalem Society, 1921. P. vii.
See also: C. R. Ashbee (ed.) *Jerusalem, 1920-1922: Being the Records of the Pro-Jerusalem Council during the period of the British Military Administration*, London: J. Murray for the Council of the Pro-Jerusalem Society, 1924.
- 20 Report by C. R. Ashbee on the Arts and Crafts of Jerusalem and District, 1918. The archeological surveys are appended as appendices to the Society's books, above.
- 21 See note 20, ibid, Volume I, 31-32; Vol. II, 29.
- 22 See note 1.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 See note 18, ibid, p. 94, footnote 59.
- 25 See note 1, ibid, p. 332.
- 26 See note 20, ibid, Vol. II, 11-14.
- 27 N. Hysler-Rubin, "The planning of colonial Jerusalem: an additional view of the work of Patrick Geddes," in: Kobi Cohen-Hatav, Asaf Zeltzer and Doron Bar (ed.) *A City in the Mirror of its Studies – Studies in the settlement historical geography of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press (in print).
- 28 P. Geddes, *Jerusalem Actual and Possible: A Preliminary Report to the Chief*

Administrator of Palestine and Military Governor of Jerusalem on Town Planning and City Improvements, November 1919, p. 16.

29 Ibid, p. 20-21.

30 See note 20, Vol. I, 2-4, Vol. II, 4-12.

31 See note 29, *ibid*, 4-5.

32 Ibid, p. 11.

33 See note 1, p. 329.

34 See note 1, *ibid*.

35 See note 20, Vol. I, pp. 11-15.

36 Numerous quotes from Geddes' report, note 19 above, see also:

P. Geddes, The masque of learning and its many meanings, devised and interpreted by Patrick Geddes (Edinburgh, Patrick Geddes and Colleagues, Outlook Tower and Chelsea, 1912).

37 See note 29, *ibid*, 10-11 and Benjamin Hyman, *British Planners in Palestine, 1918-1936*, Ph.D dissertation, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1994, p. 139, fig. 3.6, note 27.

38 As he detailed in a letter sent later to the then Governor of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs, April 1930, 10518/73-4 NLS.