

Breaking Down the Barriers in Downtown Haifa

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The Creation of the Downtown - an Introduction to Haifa's Social Geography

The port city of Haifa, Israel, has an image of a peaceful city, in which different national, ethnic and religious groups live together in relative harmony. As a major city in a country known for its tension and violence, this normality is a rare quality.

However, a closer look at the city's social geography will show us that the image of Haifa as a city of coexistence is, in many senses, a myth. In fact, the different groups in the city do not live together, but rather one above the other, in the literal sense and as a metaphor to the social power relations.

The socio-economic topography is reflected in the physical one. The population with the highest income lives in the higher parts of the city, while the Downtown municipal quarter is ranked amongst the lowest in the city¹ in socio-economical terms.

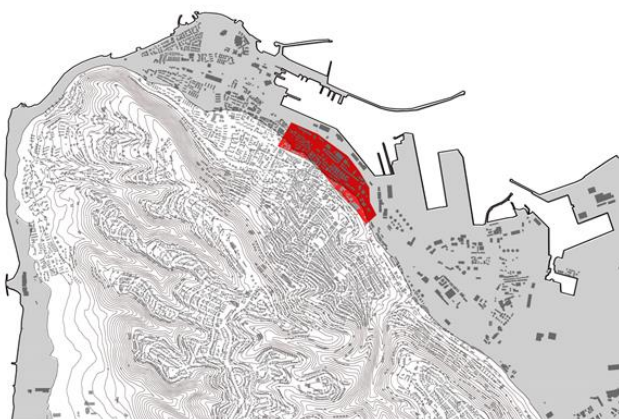


Image 1: The location of Haifa's Downtown (marked red).

¹ According to statistics published in 2014 by the Central Bureau of statistics. See:

http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications14/rep_07/pdf/map4000_h.pdf

Downtown Haifa's historical core is the Old City that dates back to the mid 18th century. In the late nineteenth century, Haifa became the commercial export center of northern Palestine and southern Syria due to its active port. Its status became stronger following the 1905 expansion of the Hejaz Railway that connected the city's port to the railway that ran from Damascus to Medina. As a result, Haifa grew from a small town with 4,000 inhabitants in 1868, to a city of 24,600 people by the beginning of first world war. The religiously diverse population consisted at that time of 40% Muslims, 40% Christians, 15% Jews, and the rest of other religions².

As Haifa started to grow beyond the walls of the Old City, it started taking on new form that was directly influenced by international and political process. At the end of the 19th century Haifa experienced the first signs of colonial affects with the founding of The German Colony west of the Old City. At the same time, the different religious and ethnic groups that lived side by side in The Old City started building separate neighborhoods as the city sprawled. However, the dramatic change came after 1917, when the British troops occupied Palestine. In the hundred years following this event Haifa went through colonial and post-colonial processes, along with traumatic events derived from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that have turned it from a compact mixed city, to a sprawling fragmented metropolis.

² Ben Artzy, Yossi, "Ottoman Period – Urban Historical Background", *Ottoman Haifa, Aspects of the City, 1516-1918, (Haifa City Museum), 2009*



Image 3: The commercial center and Al-Jarina Mosque during the Ottoman period.

Source: Mansour, Johnny, *Haifa – a Word that has become a City*, (Haifa, 2015)

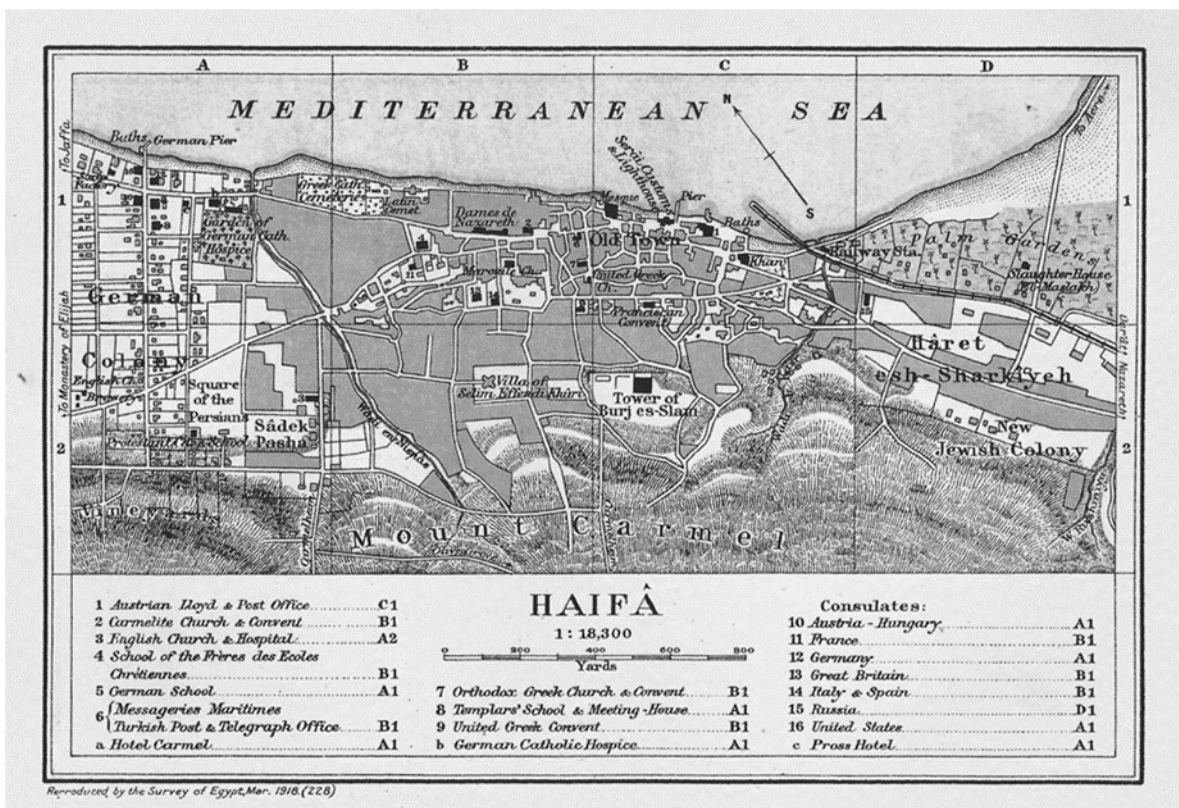


Image 4: A Map of Haifa in 1918.

source: *Ottoman Haifa, Aspects of the City*, 1516-1918, (Haifa City Museum, 2009)

While the city was being built on the slopes of the Carmel Mountain, reaching as high as 470 meters, the Downtown area at the foot of the mountain has suffered from neglect and decay. The following paragraph will review these processes and their physical and social outcome.

The Creation of the Downtown's Physical Barriers and Social Segregation

The British Mandate (1920-1948) – Colonial Motivation for the Development

The Port and the Petrochemical Industrial Area

At the time of the British Mandate, Haifa continued to grow rapidly. The population of the city during this period (1920-1948) grew by a factor of five and the built-up area grew from 0.8 to 6 square kilometers³. The biggest source of the development was the modern port built by British Mandatory Government in 1933. The main motivation for building such a massive port was the discovery of oil in Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Haifa's new port was the endpoint of the Iraq Petroleum Company (I.P.C) pipeline. Its construction necessitated the reclamation of about 340,000 square meters from the sea. Two breakwaters were also constructed – the main one 2210 meters long, and the second one 765 meters.⁴ In 1937 an oil jetty was constructed and Haifa became a main harbor for oil export. Next to the oil jetty, the British Mandatory government developed an industrial area that served European oil companies such as Shell and Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC, the source of today's BP). This area, the size of approximately third of Haifa municipal boundary, is still active today, and serves Israel's petrochemical industry.

The port, which stretches to some 3 kilometers along the city's central shore, is to this day the most significant barrier of the Downtown, with activities ranging from military,

³ Shimon Sterrn, "British Mandate Period", *Atlas of Haifa and Mont Carmel*, (Applied Scientific Research Co. University of Haifa Ltd. Haifa), 1980, P. 52

⁴ Arnon Soffer, "Haifa Port, Development", *Atlas of Haifa and Mont Carmel*, (Applied Scientific Research Co. University of Haifa Ltd. Haifa), 1980, P. 106

given the name King's Way. After 1948 it was re-named Ha'atsmuat⁵ Road, and was re-constructed, separating motorized vehicles and pedestrians and making way for faster vehicular movement.



Image 6: Downtown Haifa – 1933

Source: Israel State Archives (ISA)

The National Conflict and the War of 1948 – The Demolition of the Old City

During the 1920 and 1930s Haifa knew mass immigration of Jews fleeing pre-World War 2 Europe. The tension between the Jewish and Arab population grew as the national conflict was building up. Violent incidents pushed these two groups apart and the Jewish residents built a separate urban center in a “Hadar Ha Carmel” – a neighborhood on the slope of the mountain, overlooking Haifa Downtown. Thus, a distinction was made between the new, upper, mostly Jewish neighborhoods and the lower, older, mostly Arab parts of the city.

⁵ ‘Ha’atsmaut’ means ‘The Independence’ in Hebrew

The UN Partition Plan for Palestine, approved on the 29th of November 1947, designated Haifa as part of the proposed Jewish state, but gave it a status of a “mixed city” with both Arab and Jewish populations. By that time, the city’s population reached 140,000, of which 53% were Jews and 47% were Arab.⁶ In December 1947 a wave of violence between Jews and Arabs marked the beginning of the war. A seamline has evolved between the Downtown and Hadar Ha Carmel, separating the two national groups from one another. Tens of thousands of people living near the seamline left their homes in the following months. On 21 of April 1948, the British announced their forces are withdrawing from large parts of the city. The Jewish paramilitary organization – Ha-Hagana, attacked that same day the Arab neighborhoods in the Downtown and around it and took control over the city. Some 30,000 to 40,000 Arab residents fled the city as a result and Haifa’s Downtown was left deserted. A short time later, the authorities of the new Israeli State demolished most of the Old City, except for mosques and churches.

Israeli Historian, Yifat Wiess, describes the fate of Arab Haifa in 1948:

*“The rapid, fleeting nature of events may perhaps explain the disturbing disparity between Haifa as a Palestinian symbol of the **Nakba** (Disaster) on the one hand, and its conventional image among Jewish Israelis as a shining example of Jewish Arab coexistence, on the other”.⁷*

⁶ There are various estimations as to the number of Jewish and Arab residents in the city. The estimation stated here is according to Yifat Wiess, *A Confiscated Memory: Wadi Salib and Haifa's Lost Heritage*, (Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁷ Yifat Wiess, *A Confiscated Memory: Wadi Salib and Haifa's Lost Heritage*, (Columbia University Press, 2011).



Image 7: Displacement of Haifa's Arab residents 22 April 1948.

Source: Mansour, Johnny, *Haifa – a Word that has become a City*, (Haifa, 2015)

The First Decades of Israel's Statehood – When Modernism, Socialism and Zionism Clashed with the Reality of Haifa's Downtown

In the early years of Israeli statehood, Jewish refugees coming from the Maghreb and from post-World War 2 Europe inhabited the empty houses of the displaced Arab population in the eastern part of the downtown - Wadi Salib. The Zionist and Socialist governmental and municipal bodies had plans to continue the destruction of the downtown to make way for a modernistic urban plan. However, since the Jewish refugees lived in the houses that were supposed to be demolished until the early 1970s, the plans were not fulfilled at that time.

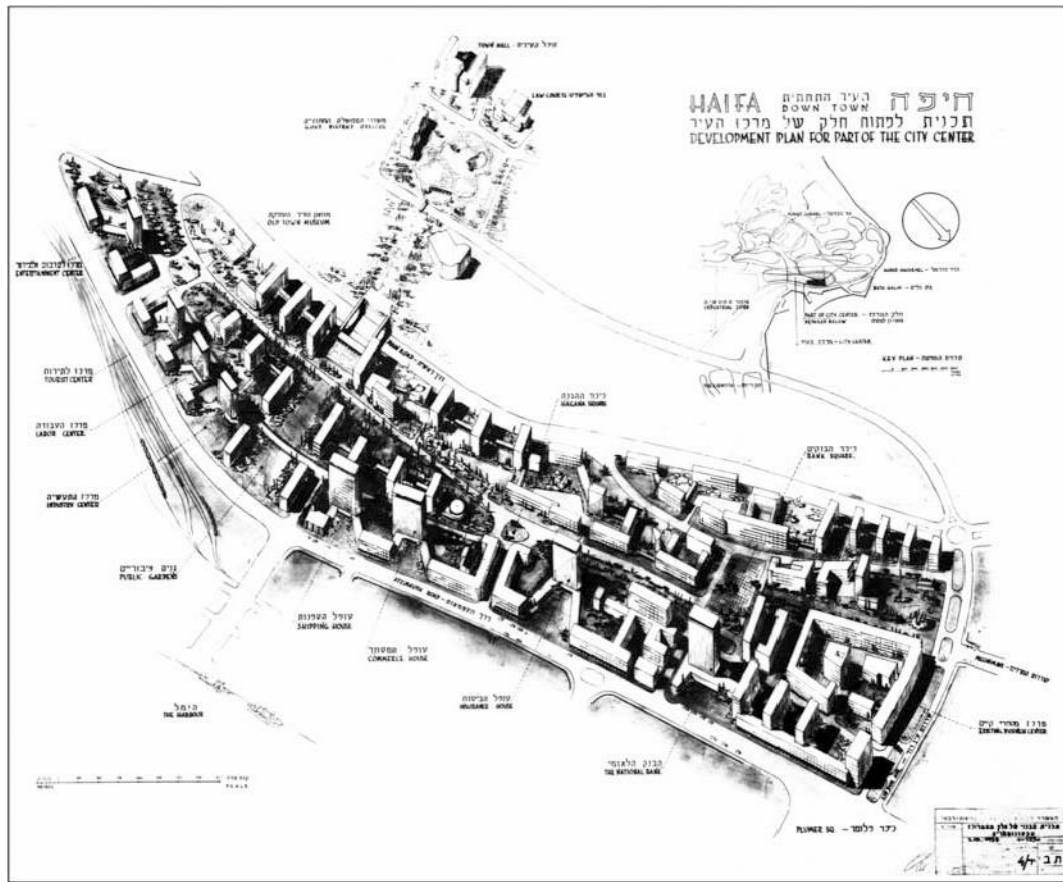


Image 8: A Plan for The Development of Haifa's Downtown, 1953 (unbuilt)

Source: Kolodney, Ziva and Kallus Rachel, "From colonial to national landscape: producing Haifa's cityscape", *Planning Perspectives*, 23 (Routledge, July 2008), p. 340

Completing the Erascape

It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that the Israeli government's modernistic plans were partly realized with the building of the Haifa's new Governmental Quarter. The iconic skyscraper, which got the nickname "the Missile Building" for its missile like shape, is the most notable building in this complex.

This process defined was by Israeli planners Ziva Kolodney and Rachel Kallush as *Erascape*⁸ - the erased landscape of the downs old core made way for a new cityscape.

⁸ Kolodney, Ziva and Kallus Rachel, "From colonial to national landscape: producing Haifa's cityscape", *Planning Perspectives*, 23 (Routledge, July 2008), p. 323–348



Image 10: Al Jarinah Mosque and Haifa's new Governmental Quarter with "The Missile Building", 2016. Photo by: Yael Bar-Maor & Laila Murad

The Municipal Reaction - Place Branding and Spectacle

Haifa is characterized by post-industrial symptoms that are common in many port cities around the world. In "The Urban Revolution", Lefebvre described the industrial city as an often *"shapeless town, a barely urban agglomeration, a conglomerate or conurbation..."*⁹. The Haifa metropolitan area fits this description, as the city lacks a distinct urban center. According to Lefebvre, the *industrial city* serves as a prelude to what he defines as a *critical zone*.

⁹ Henry Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2003[1970]), p. 14

In the *critical zone*: “The increase in industrial production is superimposed on the growth of commercial exchange and multiplies the number of such exchanges. This growth extends from the simple barter to the global market...”¹⁰.

Haifa is in a continuing process of entering the *critical zone* as its economy is shifting. The port and the industry adjacent to it are no longer the most dominant economic generators of the city. International and local companies linked to the global hi-tech economy have based their offices at the edges of the metropolis, in segregated compounds. The Tel Aviv metropolitan area offers more job opportunities suitable for the age of the global economy, than Haifa. As a result, there is a continuous flow of workers, which either migrate or commute from Haifa to the Tel Aviv metropolis.

These processes take their toll on Haifa’s urban environment, and most intensely on its Downtown. Every single block in the central Downtown contains apartments, offices or stores that are closed down. The presence of deserted businesses and apartments gives the passerby a feeling of walking in an urban *Greyfield*.

¹⁰ Ibid



Image 11: Greyfield Symptoms: shattered windows and closed-down shops at the Clifford Holliday block on Ha'atsmaut Road. Photo by: Yael Bar-Maor & Laila Murad

In recent years, the City of Haifa has been trying to brand its Downtown as *“a lively student-centered compound, combining cultural life, entertainment and commerce”*¹¹. The Downtown Administration, which manages this place-branding campaign, belongs to the municipality but acts more like a management of a shopping mall. Its aim is to promote the economic potential of the Downtown area and to attract business people and entrepreneurs. The strategy the administration is that of place branding by tools of festivity and spectacles.

In the last few years, the Downtown Administration has tried to attract businesses in an attempt to revive the city, by giving owners of empty properties an exemption from municipal tax payment for one year should they rent their store to Haifa municipality. The municipality sub-rented these spaces under a project that it branded as ‘Compound no.

¹¹ As published in the Downtown Administration’s official website: <http://downtown.co.il/en/>

21' to artists and designers. This "urban rehabilitation" project focused on attracting agents of "the creative class". Financial benefits for 'hip' designer shops along with 'festivals' based on consumption were meant to initiate a gentrification process. Real-estate speculators started buying properties for rent in the Downtown. However, many of these properties stand un-rented and some of the designer shops and galleries have closed down once the financial benefits have expired.¹²

We claim that the failure to turn the Downtown from a *Greyfield* to a vibrant urban space is due to the fact the barriers that fragment the Downtown have not been lifted.

The Administration tries to attract students and designers by organizing festivals and fairs and encouraging entrepreneurs to convert deserted buildings to student dorms. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of people, which live in the central part of the downtown. Unfortunately, this effort focuses on short-term inhabitants. Thus, as a representative of the downtown administration told us, they have achieved in "increasing the number of beds of beds in the central downtown from 2000 to 3000". The local communities gain very little from the so-called urban revival, since the barriers described before, still limit the everyday urban environment of the downtown.

Several years ago, Ha'Atsmaut Road has been transformed to make way for a new public transportation system, built for a BRT¹³ system branded as 'The Metronit', which has its own lane in the center of the street, bounded by fences and high vegetation. As if the barrier set by the vehicular transportation was not enough, The BRT fences made it virtually impossible for pedestrians to cross the street, except in the limited crossings.

¹² about the problems of "compound 21", see Shani Litman's article in Ha'aretz from (8.12.2016)[in Hebrew]: <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/art/.premium-1.2506928>

¹³ BRT = Bus Rapid Transit

An Alternative Reaction – A call to break down the barriers of Downtown

Haifa

A Proposal for a Shared Space in Downtown Haifa

“Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character (...). Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to space. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these ‘real systems whose existence make up the city’.”¹⁴ (De Certeau)

As an alternative reaction, we have chosen, in this work to look at downtown Haifa through the eyes of the pedestrians, because the collective act of walking, as De Certeau identified is one of the practices that make up the city.

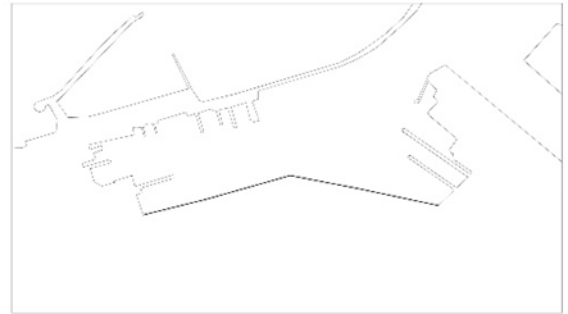
In order to break down the segregating barriers, we propose a design based on the following criteria:

- Relating to space as a shared platform.
- Removal of barriers (motor impairment, visual, and physical fences).
- Changing the transport system.
- Linking the city to the sea
- Changing the coastline and creating a longer and more varied coastline.
- Directing the movement towards the port by using existing and historical gates and openings.
- Increasing the built mass and suggesting urban infills of mixed-use blocks.
- Adopting the local urban typologies for the new proposed buildings.

¹⁴ Michele de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (University of California Press, 1984), p. 97



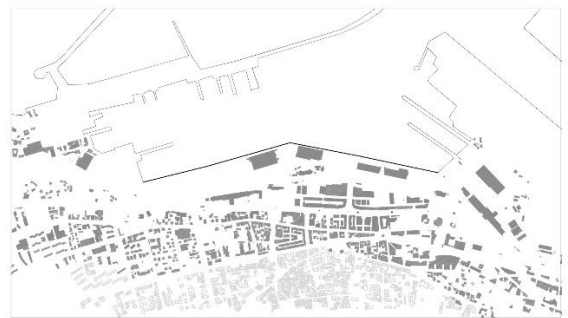
Proposed coastline



Existing coastline



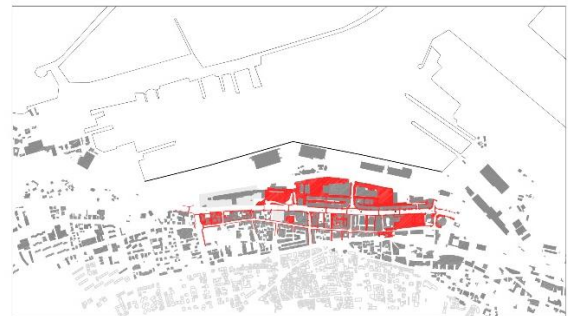
Proposed urban fabric



Existing urban fabric



Proposed pedestrian accessibility



Existing pedestrian accessibility

Image 13: Proposed design vs. existing situation

The streets as a Share Space

The proposed section removes the presumed priority that vehicle users have over pedestrians.

Ha'atmaut Road, in its current state, is planned first and foremost for vehicles, with a wide carriageway and multiple lanes, large signs which can be seen from a distance and plenty of car parking for adjacent businesses. Pedestrians are less thought of – with very few places to cross the street and narrow sidewalks.

The shared space eliminates the limits for pedestrians, as the public space completely open and fenceless. Car-free areas are created by the use of trees and street furniture. Similar principles can be implemented on more narrow streets.

Renewing the Connection Between the City and the Sea

The proposed Shared Space reaches the coastline, giving the public access to the sea that was denied for generations. After over 80 years of reclamation projects, we propose “giving back” some of the reclaimed land to the sea by creating small artificial bays that can be used for marinas. Thus, the coastline where the city meets the sea, will be longer and more varied.

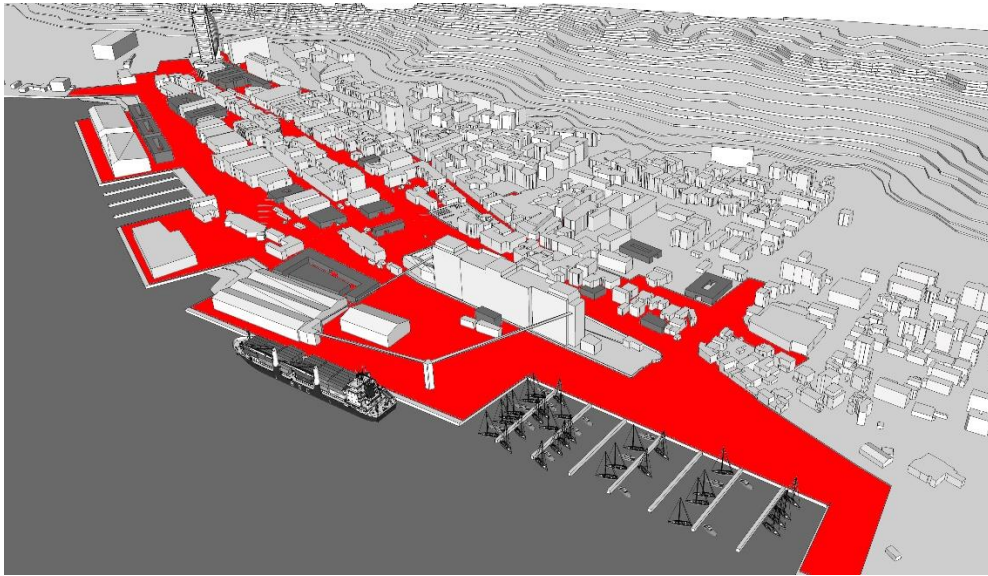


Image 13: Proposed Shared Space

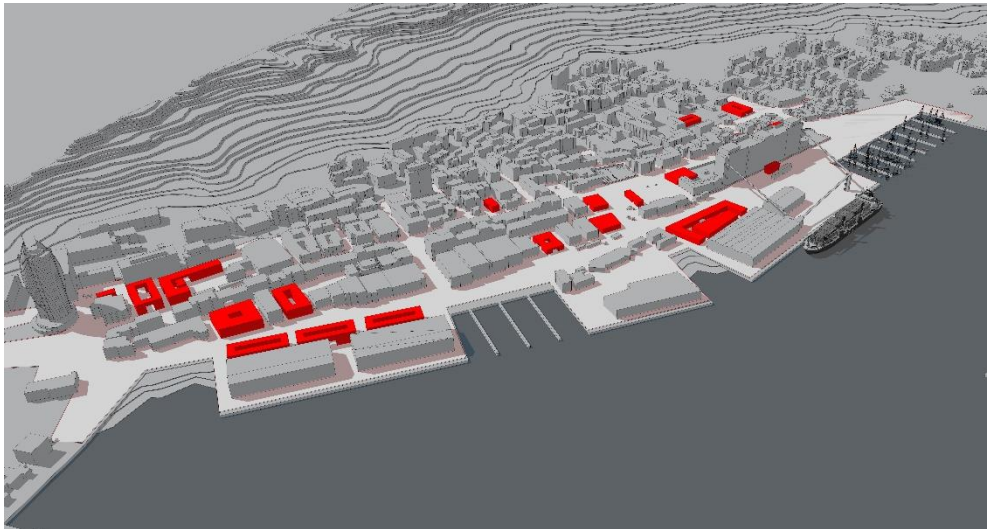


Image 14: Proposed Urban Infills

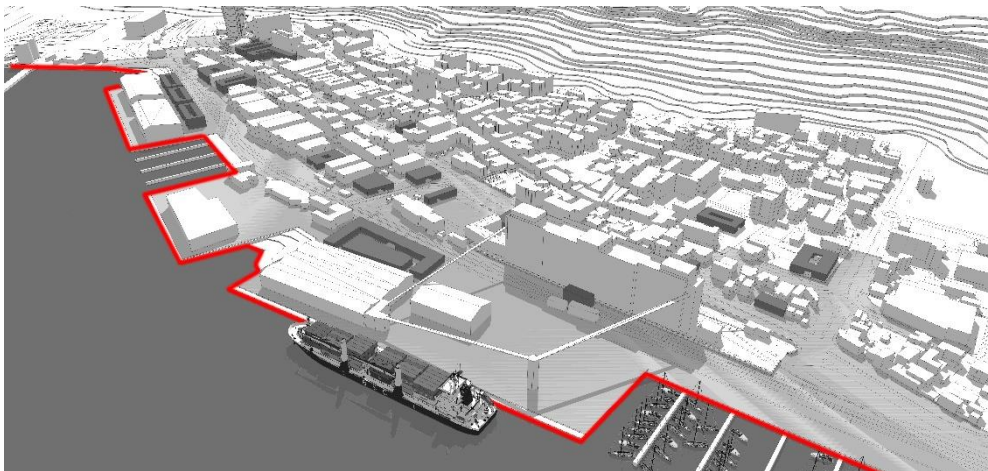


Image 15: Proposed Coastline

Conclusion

“The urban is, therefore, pure form: a place of encounter, assembly, stimulation. This form has no specific content, but is a center of attraction and life. It is an abstraction, but unlike a metaphysical entity, the urban is a concrete abstraction, associated with practice.”¹⁵

This text has demonstrated through the example of downtown Haifa how physical separation caused by extreme zoning and by massive infrastructure is often reflected in social segregation.

Place branding is perceived as a “rehabilitation” tool for areas that suffer from urban decay. Haifa’s the Downtown Administration has been trying to re-brand the downtown through acts of festivity and consumption. By doing so, it is treating the downtown as an economic resource rather than a place to live in.

In contrast to this theme-park renewal approach, we propose change through one of the key factors of the practice of everyday life: movement.

If the city is a concrete abstraction associated with practice, as Lefebvre claimed, we would like to see Haifa reflecting social justice through its form. The design proposes a physical act. At the same time, it is a social declaration, which points out that urban rehabilitation is about eliminating fences. Reviving a decayed city cannot be achieved by branding, but rather by fighting segregation and separation.

Note

The work presented in the paper is part of a thesis written for the Urban Design Master's Degree Program, Bezalel Academy for Arts and Design, Jerusalem.

¹⁵ Henry Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]), p. 119

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