



Urban Transformation and the Place of Subversive Resistance

Rachel KALLUS, Associate Professor
Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, Israel
arkalus@tx.technion.ac.il

The paper examines Haifa's urban transformation vis-à-vis the Women in Black vigil, a political demonstration taking place weekly in a public urban space. An attempt is made to understand how the city's urban structure, including its geographic and demographic arrangement and its socio-political circumstances set the arena for the Women in Black vigil. To understand how the particular site allows the women to voice their protest, the examination considers the site's characteristics, location specificity, and place distinctions, against the urban structure and the meaning of the vigil's site in the overall process of urban change.

Women in Black is a world-wide network of women committed to peace and actively opposed to injustice, war, militarism and violence. It is not an organization, but a means of mobilization and a formula for action taken by women to voice their opinion in the public space. Women in Black vigils were started in Israel in 1988 one month after the first Palestinian Intifada had broken out, by women protesting against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Women began to stand in weekly vigils in public places, usually at busy road junctions. Starting in Jerusalem, the number of vigils in Israel eventually grew up. In the north of Israel, where the concentration of Arab communities is greatest, Palestinian women who are Israeli citizens are also active in Women in Black groups. The vigils are predictable: same site, same time each week. The choice of time and dress has a clear subversive meaning (Benski, 2005) and expresses the women feelings and the structure, aims and content of their protest (Helman and Rapoport, 1997).

The vigil sites are always major public spaces, usually visible and exposed traffic intersections. The current site of the Haifa's vigil, at the foot of the newly built Bahai Garden, is the third in a series of locations used since the late 1980s. It has been selected in the early 2000, after the previous location was continuously invaded by Right wing demonstrators who drove the women away by harassing, cornering, and separating them from the street. At the present site, a busy noisy intersection providing no protection from sun and rain, as the previous site did, the women feel safer since at the center of a roundabout they are more exposed and actually separated from passer-by on foot. However, while the previous site was in the midst of a mixed-use central urban area, populated by immigrants mainly from the former Soviet Union, known to be associated with the nationalist movement, the current site is considered an Arab area. Although this raises questions about the effectiveness of the vigil as a political protest, the recent development of the Bahai Garden and the German Colony adjacent to the new site put it in the public eyes of out-of-town visitors and international tourists.

The vigil's changing locations over the years, draws attention to the urban transformation occurring in Haifa, as the city seeks to reposition itself in national and transnational scenes, to take advantage of the move from socialist to neoliberal economy, and to confront contested geopolitical circumstances.

KEY WORDS: Urban change; public urban space, socio-cultural aspects of the urban space, contested spaces.