



## Reconstructing urban image through cultural flagship events: The case of Bat-Yam



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### ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a broad range of towns and cities investing major efforts in devising culture-led urban strategies. These strategies have often been explained against the backdrop of economic neoliberalization that forced municipal administrations to re-invent the local in order to stimulate urban development by attracting new residents, tourists and investors alike. In this context, scholarship has identified urban festivals and other flagship events as major drivers of urban regeneration. Considerably less attention has been paid to the role of festivals in the eradication of long-conceived territorial stigmas. Using the case of Bat-Yam, this paper examines how an international festival has sought to re-construct a defamed mid-sized city's image. Specifically, we argue that the city-sponsored International Biennale of Landscape Urbanism, which was part of a broader culture-led urban strategy, deployed creative means to breathe new meanings into some of its most entrenched stigmatized attributes, including urban density and marginal(ized) cultural practices.

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### Introduction

The past couple of decades have seen a surge of interest in the role of arts, culture and creativity in the production of urban space. These means have been integrated into the arsenal of policies by which entrepreneurial cities compete in the globalizing economy (Brenner & Theodor, 2002; Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 1989; Site, 2003). In their transition towards becoming spaces of consumption (Zukin, 1991), local administrations have embraced entertainment, pleasure and festivity as both a means and an end for city making (Hughes, 1999). While arts, culture and creativity have been integral to urban policy since the 1970s as urban economic catalyzers in the context of industrial restructuring of Western cities, they have recently become key components in urban planning, policy and practice. The urban essence is now, more than ever before, connoted with the accumulation and facilitation of creative capacities. As Peck (2005:740) critically suggests, creative strategies have become “the policies of choice, since they license both a discursively distinctive and an ostensibly deliverable development agenda.”

Impressive literature now exists that focuses on arts, culture and creativity as important assets to urban strategies of global cities

(Muñoz, 2006; Sassen, 2000; Waitt, 1999). Culture, as a key element of urban strategies, was also documented in the context of other, considerably smaller cities such as Bilbao, Glasgow, Newcastle and Turin (Garcia, 2004a; Jamieson, 2004; McCarthy, 2002; Vanolo, 2008). Studies have highlighted flagship developments in the form of capital support or public ownership of cultural facilities such as museums, locally-sponsored and operated flagship events (e.g., festivals), designation of special cultural districts, changing planning regulations to support cultural practices, and the provision of incentives for cultural industries or individuals (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010), which O'Connor (2007: 35) defined as “micro-activities associated with the small scale cultural entrepreneurs and urban activists.”

Much of the literature has assessed and critiqued strategies by underlying their (political) economic impact on the urban landscape. Thus, their impact was often measured against their success, or lack thereof, in creating jobs, attracting financial investments (Vicario & Monje, 2003) and tourism (Loukaitou-Sideris & Soureli, 2012), or through the economic revitalization of distressed city sections, both residential and industrial (Lloyd, 2002; Pratt, 2010). However, as Bassett (1993) reminds us, applying creative strategies for the purpose of economic reinforcement might work, but *only* for cities situated at the heart of the global economy. Therefore, other goals of culture-led urban strategies, though related to economic aspirations, may well include the transformation of urban image

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through branding (Evans, 2003; Vanolo, 2008), motivation and incentivization of local governance (Benneworth & Dauncey, 2010), and community mobilization (e.g. Bailey, Miles, & Stark, 2004; Lin & Hsing, 2009; Nakagawa, 2010). Another prevalent distinction is made between the different impacts of culture-led strategies: The economic impact, relatively easier to commensurate, referring to such criteria as employment, visitors attraction and private investments; The physical or regenerative impact, referring to the physical environment and the urban infrastructure; The social and cultural impact, referring to longer-term, less tangible, and therefore more difficult to measure, changes, such as the city's identity amongst inhabitants, internal and external image of the city and cultural experience or cultural atmosphere in the city (Evans & Shaw, 2004; Garcia, 2004b, 2005).

In this paper we set to study the implementation of a culture-led urban strategy in the Israeli city of Bat-Yam. A second-tier urban center, Bat-Yam has been long subjected to a widespread territorial stigma that centered on its inadequate planning, ethnic population and anti-social culture (Cohen, 2013). Following a change in leadership in the early 2000s, the city embarked upon a comprehensive strategy, which used culture as a means to reconstruct its image. Deploying a wide range of cultural events, the strategy was to imbue urban space with new meanings. Chief among these has been the International Biennale of Landscape Urbanism. The Biennale was to transform Bat-Yam's image by creatively experimenting with its defamed urban space and cultural practices. Thus, rather than erasing the stigma's various components (e.g., density), it engaged them artistically through different projects, re-configuring them in manners that made them the city's social and spatial strengths. Using a case study approach, we draw on a series of participant observations and interviews held with representatives of the municipality, Biennale artists and staff members as well as residents of Bat-Yam (July 2011–May 2013). We also analyzed primary and secondary materials related to projects of both Biennale events (e.g., official brochures, invitations and books).

The remainder of the article is divided into four parts. Firstly, we set our study against the theoretical backdrop of culture as an urban strategy, paying particular attention to the role of flagship events in reconstructing urban image. We then briefly discuss the historical geography of Bat-Yam, our field of research, and attend to the trajectories through which it had been stigmatized. In the third section, we analyze selected projects of the Biennale (2008 and 2010) as part of a comprehensive image reconstruction strategy. We focus primarily on projects that attempted to counter the 'planning' and 'practice' components of the stigma and illustrate the extent to which they have been successful in re-formulating new meanings to both urban space and population. We conclude by drawing key lessons from the case of Bat-Yam.

### Changing urban image: Strategies and motivations

Arts and culture both play a significant role in urban development strategies in post-industrial cities. Creativity as an urban asset can "generate new 'scripts' for places, even whole cities, whose competitiveness and civic fortunes can be turned around – a 'creative reinvention' of sorts" (Gibson, Gallan, & Warren, 2012:1). Culture-led strategies including mega and/or spotlight events, such as festivals, are used to display an attractive urban image in the international media (Avraham, 2004) and usher in the mobilization of the creative class into the city (Florida, 2002). Concentrating and maintaining urban creative qualities is also achieved through the mobilization of 'cultural mediators' such as artists and artisans. These can help shape the image of urban areas as inviting and accessible for upper classes and more advanced industries (Markusen &

Gadwa, 2010; Mele, 2000), which in turn, can recreate urban sections or the entire city (Gibson et al., 2012).

Size and level of globalism notwithstanding, cities deploy similar strategies. Poor, aging and often overly built or deindustrialized cities allocate a great deal of resources into reconstructing their image as attractive places to invest, live, work and visit. Through branding initiatives, cities also attempt to distinguish themselves from other competing cities. For instance, in recent years, cities that had lost their uniqueness within the homogenously suburbanizing Tel Aviv metropolitan area have crowned themselves as *The City of Music* (Rosh HaAyin), *The City of Children* (Holon), *The Green City* (Kfar Saba), and *The City of Science and Culture* (Rehovot). These 'royal robes' are not entirely lacking in content, however, and they are realized, if only superficially, through urban design and new urban practices. Urban branding in general became a popular, almost essential strategy in the arsenal of urban redevelopment (Dinnie, 2010). So much so that, as Vanolo (2008:372) suggests, "urban policies of image development and city-marketing are basically cheap, and many towns fell into the trap of serial reproduction of promotional policies [...] and saw their message disappear in the crowd of similar urban images in the marketplace."

The production of flagship events aimed at facilitating urban regeneration is one strategy that has gained prominence in recent years (Fainstein, 2010). These events can be defined as medium-term investments of resources into organization and infrastructure, intended to attract visitors and attention to the locale for an allocated period of time. Merely submitting a proposal to host an international event – even if it is unsuccessful – improves the municipality's, and even the region's, organizational capabilities, enables collaborations that had not previously been realized, and can even catalyze the resolution of major dilemmas in urban and regional planning (Benneworth & Dauncey, 2010). The most famous of the flagship events are the large-scale sporting events, though they are joined by a wave of festivals, art and cultural events adopted by cities of different sizes (Garcia, 2004a; Quinn, 2005).

The impact (economic, social, or physical) of cultural flagship events is dependent upon their scale and duration, though research on some notable cases (e.g. Glasgow) has confirmed that most are short term, and hence, unsustainable. Evidence of regeneration is mostly related to social impact, realized through a positive change to the internal and external image of the city, as well as through economic impact, realized through increased tourism and spending by residents and visitors (Evans & Shaw, 2004). Though the deployment of flagship events as part of urban cultural policy or strategic planning has become prevalent, it is suggested that this policy is often the product of a dispersed and fragmented network of actors that includes both the private and the third sectors, in what has become understood as urban governance. The actual impact of the policy, as suggested by the examples from Liverpool, UK (O'Brien, 2011) and Baltimore, US (Ponzini & Rossi, 2010), is highly skewed by power imbalances between network participants and their differing objectives and priorities.

Urban festivals have been instrumental in establishing patriotism and civic identity in the pre-modern city. Later, they aimed to enhance cultural development in order to reinforce and reproduce the urban elite (Quinn, 2005; Waite, 2008). Today, (international) festivals are integral to branding efforts, as entrepreneurial performances geared towards the creation of a positive urban image and the attraction of capital, people and services to the city (Quinn, 2005). The excessive adoption of festivals and other culture-led activities as part of Florida's creative city paradigm, induces cities to develop and maintain "the kind of 'people climates' valued by creatives – urban environments that are open, diverse, dynamic and cool" (Peck, 2005: 740). Municipalities assimilate the 'creative scheme' regardless of, and often in conflict with, the needs of local residents. It is therefore criticized not only as fundamentally elitist,

but also as a full acceptance of cultural gentrification as a productive mode of urban policy (Peck, 2005). Moreover, the tendency to apply (and to study) culture-led regeneration on the scale of a city, a neighborhood, or an industry, rather than on the micro scale of people and their everyday practice, only reifies exploitation and marginalization effects and obscures the only beneficiaries of the policy – the elite (Ettlinger, 2010; Ponzini & Rossi, 2010). While art might appear to be a space that produces and enables social critique, these art events are initiated and organized by the establishment – normally the municipality – and therefore, the scope of their critique and their grassroots-ness are limited (Bianchini, 1990). Additionally, festivals are practically used as temporal means to induce permanent physical and economic changes, while upholding against possible social critiques and bypassing orderly planning procedures (Waitt, 2008). Hosting contemporary festivals are thus a globally accepted urban practice, promoted in order to primarily achieve economic strength, improve the city image and attract wealthy populations.

Municipalities may be interested in highlighting and extracting both economic and social value from events held within their jurisdiction. However, because they are held captive by the needs of the market and are rarely the sole organizers of events, generating economic value normally take precedence over social and communal objectives (Quinn, 2005). However, on a more general level, festivals and culture-led strategies may provide opportunities for the ignition of a bottom-up social change that accentuates (rather than eliminates) difference, reinvigorates existing community ties and people's perception of place,<sup>1</sup> improves its quality of life (rather than replacing it with 'stronger' populations), and enables a space of resistance and not merely elite reproduction (Quinn, 2005; Sasaki, 2010; Waitt, 2008).

Both proponents and critics of the creative city thesis agree that social diversity and cultural productivity play an important role in the process by which cities strive to uphold their distinctive outlook (Florida, 2005; Quinn, 2005; Zukin, 1998). Indeed, the art festival combines tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, spontaneity and authenticity through display, and usually praises public space and draws attention to the relationship between place identities (Quinn, 2005). Some scholars have highlighted the positive potential of culture-led urban governance, especially its capacity to strengthen social cohesion, reinvigorate communities and even facilitate activism and social change (Bailey et al., 2004; Lin & Hsing, 2009). Therefore, and despite its sporadic nature and top-down organization, it has been suggested that art festivals, if attentive to the particularities of the local, can bring about socio-spatial difference, rather than lead to the 'reproduction of sameness' (Quinn, 2005:928). Art festivals could even constitute an opportunity for a different kind of urban development, which may help "to maintain a sense of unique 'local' urban identity in the context of 'globalization'" (Waitt, 2008: 520).

Jamieson (2004: 73) suggests that Edinburgh, the self-proclaimed and world acclaimed 'City of Festivals', successfully became a cultural pilgrimage site by institutionalizing a regimented 'choreography' and 'topography' of festival spaces. These spatio-temporally bounded festivities ignored other cultures, spaces, classes, tastes and quarters of the city, rendering them invisible. Therefore, she concludes, Edinburgh's successful cultural strategy did not aim for the reordering or reimagining of urban components that did not fit squarely to the aesthetic of the festival.

Similarly, Garcia (2004a) shows that Glasgow (1990), Sydney (2000) and Barcelona's (2004) art events were structured in central parts of the city and catered to the privileged groups, while over-

looking peripheral areas and communities. In all three cities, the strategy's guiding principal was that the attraction of tourists would enable the city to draw in the wealth required to redress local needs. Nevertheless, Garcia indicates that arts programming facilitated and created new partnerships and collaborations between government and civil society groups, which benefited the greater community.

### From 'Garden City' to 'the Metro's forgotten periphery': A brief history of Bat-Yam

Bat-Yam was established in the mid-1920s by a group of Zionist Orthodox Jews who sought to get away from the crowded, overpriced and secular Tel Aviv (Olitzki, 1984). Originally named *Bayit Vagan* (Hebrew for *home and garden*), after its founders' suburban vision that was inspired by Howard's (1902) [1965] notion of *Garden Cities*, the neighborhood slowly developed into a town of 3000 people (1948). Post-war annexation of over 4000 dunams and the absorption of thousands of Jewish immigrants propelled massive expansion in the following decades. By the late 1960s, Bat-Yam had been transformed from a semi-urban settlement on the outskirts of the large city, to a vibrant city of over 70,000 at the heart of the expansive Tel Aviv metropolitan area – the most densely populated urban area in Israel (also known as Gush Dan; see Map 1).

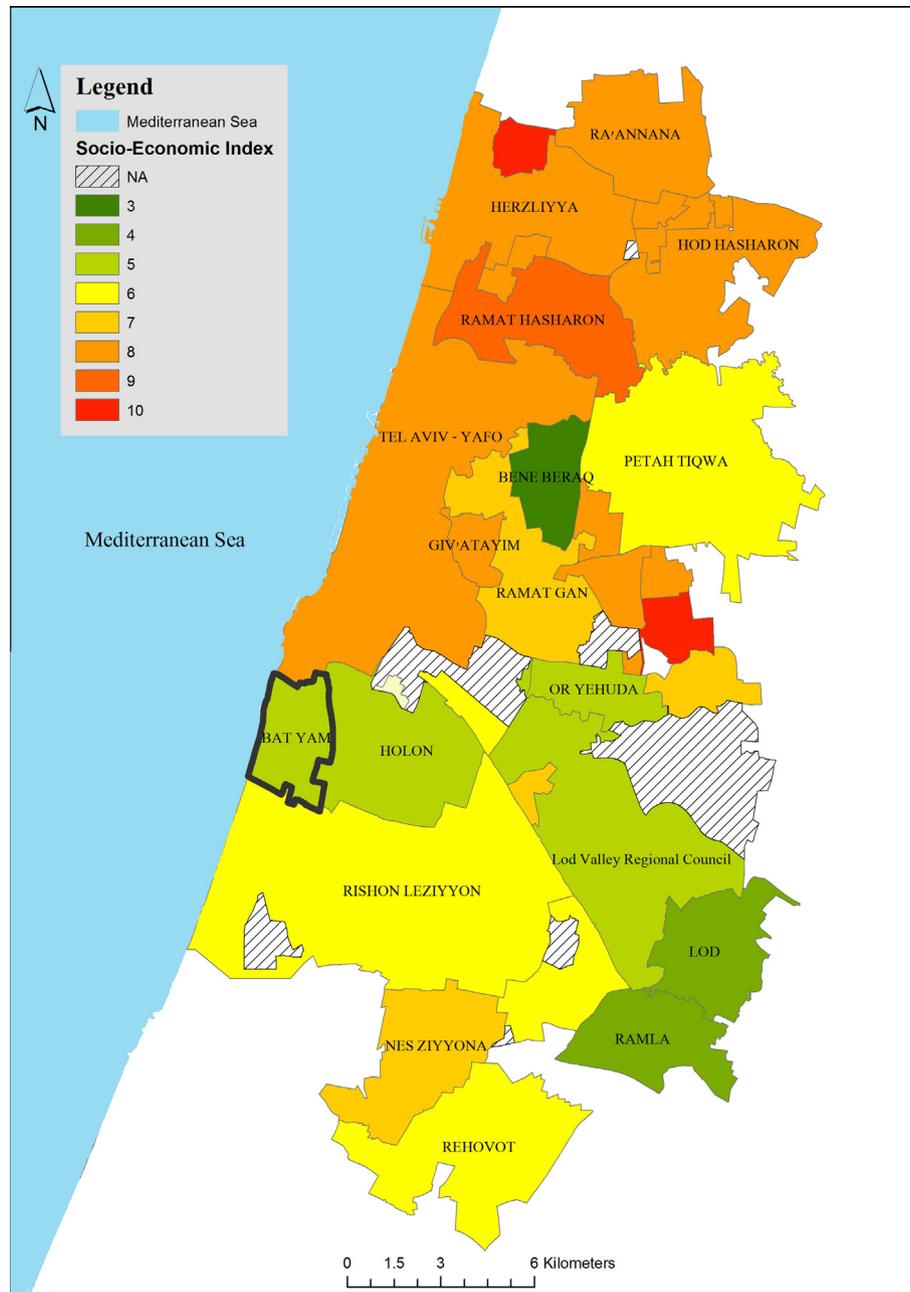
Bat-Yam's unchecked growth was a double-edged sword (see Table 1). Alongside impressive projects of urban development, which its first Mayor likened to 'a benign virus', haphazard planning and poor-quality construction – motivated in part by the need to accommodate the quickly growing population – dominated the Bat-Yam landscape, turning it into the most densely populated and constructed city in the metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, as a growing proportion of residential newcomers were blue-collar *Mizrahim* (Jews originating in Muslim countries), some of whom channeled into the city from the surrounding transitory camps (*Ma'abarot*), the urban image further deteriorated. Aided by an Oriental discourse, their construction as uncultured 'others' fixated Bat-Yam as a place dominated by poor planning, undesired people and low culture. As Cohen (2013) argues, a three-pronged stigma made up of (inadequate) 'planning', (other) 'people' and (socially deviant) 'practices' had coalesced in Bat-Yam, making it "the metro's forgotten periphery, the disrespected, graceless home of mostly lower middle-class Mizrahi Jews often depicted... as the undesirable 'national average'" (p. 114).

Municipal attempts to mitigate the negative urban image date back to the 1980s. For example, Mayor Menachem Rothchild (1978–1983) asserted his intention to bolster the city's image by investing in local services that would 'refine urban private and public life',<sup>3</sup> and Mayor Ehud Kinnamon (1983–1993) spoke of his plan to get rid of the stigma by attracting business entrepreneurship and increase investment in 'educational infrastructure, [public] services, [and] employment' (Ackerman, 1986). Notwithstanding their importance and despite massive allocation of funds to those ends, these plans were only partly successful in changing Bat-Yam's negative image. Media reports featuring negative migration rates, high-levels of violent crime, and a lower than average residential standard of living surfaced occasionally, further bolstering its image of socio-spatial marginality (Cohen, 2013). Like Boland's (2008) portrayal of Liverpool, UK, but due to different historic circumstances, Bat-Yam

<sup>2</sup> A 1971 municipal report noted that urban density exceeded 11,000 people per square kilometer and that more than 80% of its territory was already built up. It gravely concluded that 'in five years urban growth will come to a halt... unless new lands that are crucial to its development in the sands of Rishon Le'Zion will be annexed to the city' (Bat-Yam, January 1971, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> Proceedings of the Protocol of City Council, December 27, 1978.

<sup>1</sup> In other contexts, such as urban branding, tourism and environmental attitudes, it is also referred to as a "sense of place".



**Map 1.** Gush Dan, Israel's urban center, by socio-economic characteristics. (The socio-economic index is published annually by the Central Bureau of Statistics and expresses the social and economic level (1–10, 1 – Lowest; 10 – Highest) of the population residing in given geographical units (regional councils, local councils, or towns), based on a compilation of various indicators (e.g. median age, household possession of consumer goods, enrollment in academic institutions, percentage of job seekers and welfare recipients.)

has become directly associated with urban ills and social problems in the news media.

The 2003 election of Mayor Shlomo Lahiani signaled a new urban era. Born and raised in Bat-Yam, the Mayor singled out culture as a key arena to de-stigmatization and re-construction of the urban image. Under his auspices, the Bat-Yam municipality deployed a culture-oriented strategy which was intended to combat the stigma by attending to two of its defining elements, namely 'planning' and 'practice'.<sup>4</sup> Though initiated top-down, the culture-led strategy was steered through a network of public, private and civic platforms. These platforms included the city-funded Center

for Mediterranean Urbanism and Culture and the philanthropic Beracha foundation and the strategy was guided by two major principles; firstly, a concerted effort to attract young artists to work and reside in the city. Such projects included the 2009 establishment of *Art Factory*, which offered free galleries to artists. Another was the allocation of studio spaces located in the city's rundown industrial area to artists in exchange for their commitment to engage with residents through various communal projects (e.g., organize art workshops at local schools). Unlike neighboring Tel Aviv, which often appeals to established artists, Bat-Yam sought to open its doors to fringe and avant-garde art(ists). Secondly, multiple large-scale cultural events were organized in order to transform Bat-Yam's once crowded, intimidating public space into inviting arenas of creative experiments in which to 'activate' urbanism in the spirit of cosmo-

<sup>4</sup> Stigma eradication efforts were captured in the catchy slogan adopted by the city ('Bat-Yam: Renewing, Exciting').

**Table 1**  
Selected socio-demographic characteristics, by census year. Source: National Census Data, 1983, 1995, 2008 ([www.cbs.gov.il](http://www.cbs.gov.il)).

Census year	Total population	Population change (%) from previous census	Household size (mean)	Years of schooling (median, age 15 and over), urban/national	Household monthly income (median, NIS), urban/national
1961	31,694	NA	3.7	NA	NA
1972	100,091	215.8	3.5	NA	NA
1983	128,738	28.6	3.2	10/10	NA
1995	136,416	6.0	2.9	12/11.2	3000/3203
2008	130,310	-4.4	2.6	12/11.9	5570/6280

politanism and multiculturalism. Over the past decade, flagship events like *The Bat-Yam Street C.A.T (Creative Artistic Theatre) Festival*, *The Musical Holiday (Chag Ha'machazemer)*, and, most notably, *The Bat-Yam International Biennale of Landscape Urbanism* (here thereafter The Biennale) have been instrumental in re-constructing its entrenched negative image.<sup>5</sup> Seeking to get away from what Biennale curators have called 'the discourse of [urban] greyness and ugliness or difficult [population]' (see Zandberg, 2008), culture was used to realize Bat-Yam's urban potential and project it outwardly. In what follows we illustrate the ways by which The Biennale has sought to undo Bat-Yam's stigma.

#### *Re-thinking 'planning', re-defining 'practice'*

*'Urban action in Bat-Yam is first and foremost acknowledging Bat-Yam: seeing it, looking at it emphatically, lovingly. When you identify urban phenomena without judgmental evaluation you could see complexity' (Timing, 2010: 37)*

Organized in 2008, the first Biennale (titled 'Hosting') was a two-week gathering consisting of hundreds of street-based public events, most of which were free of charge. In 2010, the second Biennale (titled 'Timing') only lasted three days, though it held a similar number of events. It is estimated that each Biennale cost approximately 20 Million NIS (roughly \$6 Million USD), a hefty sum for a municipality whose annual budget stands at 700 Million NIS (\$200 Million USD).<sup>6</sup> The Biennales took two years to produce and involved a team of several hundred staff. Following a rigorous application process, roughly fifty projects were selected, 80% of which were implemented by local artists, while the remainder were organized by foreign teams.

While curators and their professional team oversaw the creative aspects, they were also greatly involved in most other phases of the event planning, including marketing it to different audiences. In this respect, the audience was to be drawn from four different geographic scales; locally, situating activities within different neighborhoods was instrumental to their accessibility for urban residents, and thereby instilling in them a sense of pride in their city. At the metropolitan level, it was to be attended by individuals from the entire Tel Aviv region who would not otherwise set foot in the city. Nationally, it was to draw an audience from across the country, in order to give them the experience of the reality of Bat-Yam, and not simply perceptions based solely upon media images. Finally, activities were geared towards an international audience, primarily professionals (e.g., artists, architects and planners) from Europe and North America, who were keen to learn

<sup>5</sup> The Biennale was planned as a flagship event from the outset. It aimed to help Bat-Yam fight the stigma by turning it into a hub of cutting edge thinking about urbanism. In the words of Mayor Lahiani, it was meant to make Bat-Yam an internationally known hub for tackling urban issues, presenting stakeholders 'with models of quality and educated use of urban space and provoke an internationally open discourse on the guiding principles of the optimal usage of urban public space' (Hosting, 2008:23).

<sup>6</sup> Financial support was also provided by the Beracha Foundation.

more about the local experimentation with the nexus between urban space and culture.

That the Biennale was a cultural event intended to engage with the spatial and social components of the stigma alike was a key theme. To this end, the municipality appointed an urban sociologist and a landscape architect as curators whose vision was to bring about new urban. Describing the festival's *raison d'etre*, they said,

*'[I]t must no longer be the case of upgrading public space or attending to specific social ills separately from each other or without residential participation. What we need instead is a conjoined action by the three forces that shape urban life, namely the municipality, urban residents and exogenous professionals' (Interview, May 13, 2013).*

In the spirit of taking it to the streets, city space – both private and public was transformed into an 'urban laboratory' in which unconventional, often radical creative experimentations were set up. The temporariness of the event allowed artists to wield changes on urban space in a way that would not be possible in the context of a permanent project, enabling visitors to imagine a Bat-Yam beyond the stigma. Further, the laboratory format was instrumental in challenging the municipal system's capacity to regulate innovative, unorthodox urban activities, even as they took place in open urban space. More importantly, the experimentalist approach was conceived as a way of dialoguing with Bat-Yam's arguably unplanned nature. Strewn with seemingly arbitrary artistic installations, once defamed 'disorderly' and 'chaotic' city streets have re-emerged as positive collections of 'messy' creativity, allowing visitors to re-think Bat-Yam for what it could be made into. As one of the events coordinators explained,

*[Our role is] to cultivate new understandings of the city unfettered by its image. It is essentially a task of threefold translation. We translate [artistic] ideas into action within a complex system of rules, we translate these ideas into solutions to urban problems and, finally, we translate them for the municipality's staff and the city's residents' (Interview, April 23, 2013).*

Acutely aware of the role Bat-Yam's density has played in its stigma-formation (Cohen, 2013), organizers tackled it in the context of cultural festivities. Though urban density has re-emerged as a key planning principle in Israel over the past decade,<sup>7</sup> Bat-Yam's lack of open public space remains notorious. In this respect, the delicate relationship between built up and open space and, by extension, between city and nature has taken center stage in the context of both Biennales. As Mayor Lahiani noted in his official address, experimenting with alternative trajectories of open public space provision was of utmost important because the urban environment in Israel '[I]s becoming ever more crowded and dense... [and] for Bat-Yam, where the urban fabric is tightly packed, developing a quality public space is an existential need' (Hosting, 2008: 23).

<sup>7</sup> Israel's national outline plan 35 calls for urban densification through redevelopment of existing settlement and the protection of continuous open space. See [[http://www.mmi.gov.il/IturTabotData/tma/%D7%AA%D7%9E%D7%90%2035/tama\\_35.pdf](http://www.mmi.gov.il/IturTabotData/tma/%D7%AA%D7%9E%D7%90%2035/tama_35.pdf)].

Practicality notwithstanding, his statement had important symbolic implications. A city founded on wild sand dunes, which was to be conquered using modernistic planning (e.g., Garden City), Bat-Yam never lived up to those expectations. As Ben Yisrael (2011) argues, the utopian, colorful, inviting Garden City had soon been replaced by the dystopian black and grey asphalt, which quickly depleted the originally envisioned open space. A century later, multiple projects in the Biennale had centered on the nexus of dis/re-appearance of green urban spaces, including *Ecological Garden, Roaming Forest, Urban Nature and Green Island*.<sup>8</sup> The latter, designed by a group of European artists, offered a new and critical reading of open space and invited the audience to explore the urban landscape and offer a renewed definition of urban space that is based on gardening. Similarly, *A Piece of Paradise* invited visitors to experiment with micro-scale urban agriculture for personal consumption in order to envision an alternative urban lifestyle in which food and other necessities are self-produced.

But it was the *Garden Portions* project that seemed to have gone the furthest in re-thinking Bat-Yam's infamous density, including its existing stock of notoriously small apartments and meager public space. Taking over a neglected yard between two rundown apartment buildings, artists allocated each owner a garden portion for its personal use. Portions were designated as an extension of residential private space,<sup>9</sup> which artists hoped would alleviate their perceived seclusion and simultaneously transform an underused space into an everyday site of meaningful encounters between apartment owners. In their words, the project was 'to bring the people down to the earth [and]... bring the people down to the people' (Interview, July 10, 2011).

These innovative projects allowed residents to imagine a better usage of rundown, often dilapidated urban space all while enabling non-resident visitors to see Bat-Yam as both 'what it is' and 'what it could be made into'. Different engagements with – and new meanings given to – urban public space were intended to dissuade locals and visitors alike from seeing Bat-Yam *only* through the dated lenses of stigma. Instead, it invited them to imagine the possibilities embedded in its private and public spaces and to physically participate in their carefully-planned transformation. Through various experimental artistic projects, residential spatial needs, historically ignored by short-sighted planning practices, were to be better accommodated.

The second theme of the creative projects which both Biennales were concerned with was the practice of everyday life in Bat-Yam. As mentioned earlier, the city has long been associated with marginal populations and anti-social conduct (Cohen, 2013). Negative portrayals in local and national media soared in the 1970s and 1980s, depicting the city as an unwelcoming locale where low-class, welfare-receiving Mizrahim reside and whose unsafe streets were dominated by petty and organized crime. Certain sites within the city, including the beach, residential neighborhoods (*Amidar* and *The Ma'abara*<sup>10</sup>) and its main plaza ('Defenders' Square) were so severely defamed that they often acquired their own stigma (see Map. 2). The latter, for example, was described by a leading Israeli journalist as a place with a 'reality like no other place [in Israel] exists...' (Dunevitch, 1970) gener-

ating a national debate over the misrepresentation of Bat-Yam in the media.

It is against this background that projects of the Biennale sought to offer residents and visitors a different view of the city. In an attempt to de-construct its stigma as an unsafe, economically vulnerable and socially dysfunctional city in need of external salvation, its organizers pursued a strategy that underscored its inherent strengths, communal cohesiveness and cultural vitality. As curators shrewdly explained, selecting the theme of 'hosting' for the 2008 Biennale was instrumental to transforming Bat-Yam's image from being a passively 'receiving' place into an actively 'engaging' place, capable of providing a stimulating experience to residents and visitors alike. In their words,

'Bat-Yam is a place that doesn't want to be taken care of anymore. The city is tired of 'neighborhood rehabilitation' and other patronizing actions. It prefers to make suggestions and be entrepreneurial, to extend its hand not to panhandle' (Timing, 2010:37)

In order to do so, each Biennale has taken place in an urban area that had been negatively portrayed in the past. In 2010, activities centered on and around the city's industrial zone, while in 2012 they were designated to concentrate in the *Amidar* residential neighborhood. Infamous for its inadequate infrastructure and poor public services, the neighborhood had been featured over the years in numerous media reports (see Shiloni, 1986). More importantly, like many other projects of public housing built in Israel in the 1950s, *Amidar* was overwhelmingly populated by impoverished Mizrahi immigrants. Ethno-class 'otherness' has gradually become the neighborhood's most defining character, further embellishing its and the city's – negative image. As Cohen and Ben Yisrael (2012:3) argue in this respect, 'The consolidation of distinct place-based social character and ethnic identity in *Amidar* marked the onset of Bat-Yam's socio-economic and spatial segmentation... [which] was to become a key factor in its urban stigmatization'.

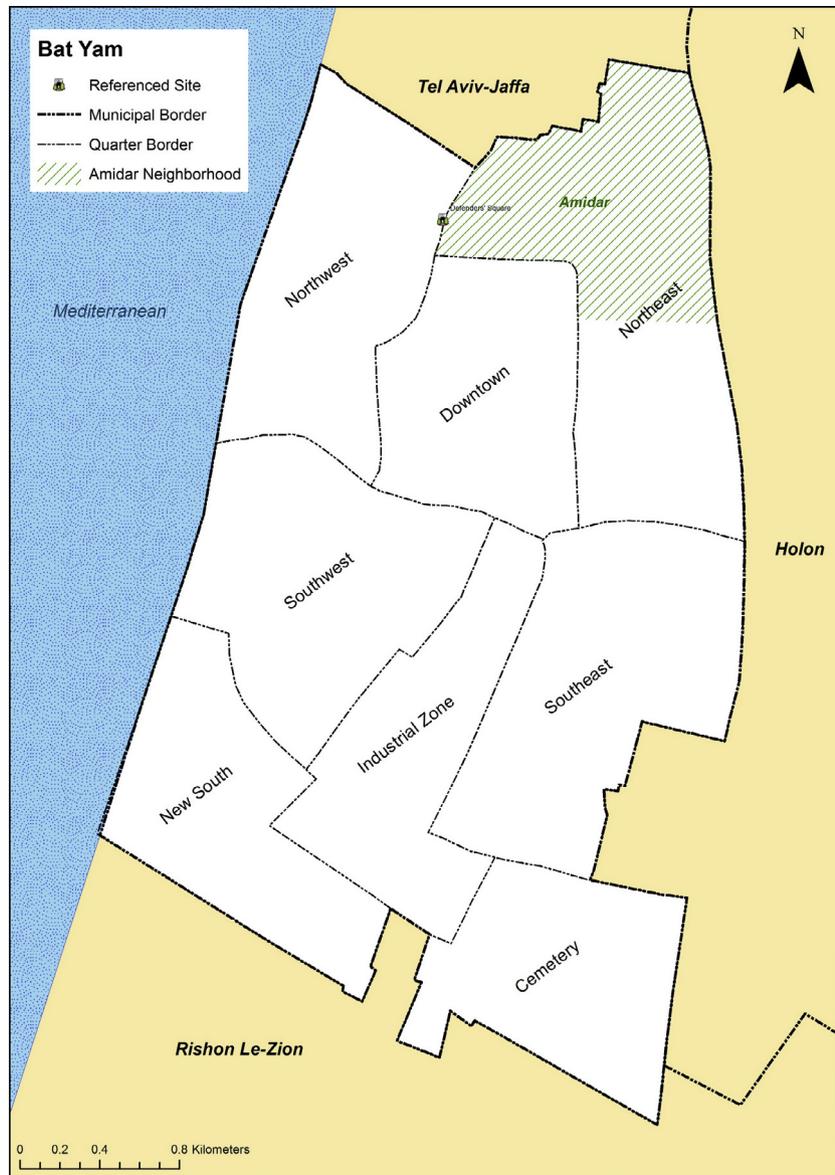
To counterbalance stereotypes concerning the neighborhood's unsavory character and its residents' image as passive subjects, an urban engagement project was deployed during the 2010 Biennale. Titled 'A Different Urban Experience', the project was a series of workshops aimed to train local residents 'to take an active role in urban life, stand for their [urban] rights, and understand the urban context' (Timing, 2010: 211). In one workshop ('I, We and the City'), residents examined 'subjective differences' between individuals that stemmed from their distinct identity markers (e.g., ethnicity, class, or age) in order 'to better understand the social complexity of cities'. Another workshop, titled 'Fantasizing Bat-Yam' allowed residents to simulate a neighborhood-wide planning process in order 'to provide participants (with) tools to actively engage in such (a) process in the future' (Timing, 2010: 214). In yet another workshop, residents were encouraged to partake in the design of their own 'external surroundings', which were defined through four scales of engagement, namely the house, the street, the neighborhood and the city. Attendees discussed various courses of action through which to negotiate with local authorities – both individually and collectively – on ways to 'improve their surroundings' in their pursuit of more livable communities (Timing, 2010).

A considerable number of creative projects were installed in or around stigmatized micro urban sites, re-infusing them with new, inverse meanings. One case in point has been a park at a local neighborhood, which has been historically associated with practices of petty crime by local youth. Transforming the park into 'an urban living room' in which local youth offered by-passers an experience of 'dynamic hospitality', the project was geared 'to produce new layers of routine activities that occur in urban open

<sup>8</sup> See [[http://www.biennale-batyam.org/eng/category\\_page.asp?id=100](http://www.biennale-batyam.org/eng/category_page.asp?id=100)].

<sup>9</sup> The result resembles inner city European allotments but without emphasis on food cultivation (and indeed residents used the lots for a variety of purposes) and without a formal lease or contract with the residents.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrew for 'Transitory Camp', a form of temporary settlement built by the Israeli state in the 1950's in order to absorb incoming Jewish migrants. Populated primarily by Mizrahim, camps were notorious for poor physical conditions and social services (See Segev, 1998). The *Ma'abara*, which was located on most of the quarter now designated as 'The New South' (see Map 2) was vacated in the late 1980's. The area has since been transformed into a large public park and a high-end residential neighborhood.



Map 2. Bat-Yam's neighborhoods.

space' (Hosting, 2008: 147). The manufactured reciprocity between 'hosting' youth and 'visitors', the temporary living room allowed the latter a new take on both juvenile conduct and their use of urban space. Formerly repelled by the image of the teenagers engaging in shady practices, visitors were invited to partake in the production of a mediating space in a friendly, non-intimidating atmosphere. As organizers reported, 'The idea is to have the neighborhood and the youth play host to each other, with the aim of dissolving, even just a little, the boundaries that separate them' (Hosting, 2008: 147).

Further attempts at de-stigmatization included the infamous Defenders' Square, Bat-Yam's center of commerce and entertainment, which lies on the border with Jaffa. In contrast to its historical depiction in the media as a hotbed of illegal activities, including prostitution and drug dealing (Cohen, 2013), festivities sought to embed the Square in a positive discourse of open and inviting urbanism. One project invited local residents to reflect on their own personal memories of the square. Not surprisingly, criminalized and Orientalized attributes once attached to it were converted in residential narratives, which underscored its qualities as a site of cultural hybridity. As a former local resident recalled,

'The Square...[was]...the busiest spot in town...a location permeated with the whiff of pastry and coffee shops and the odors of roasting nuts and ground coffee coming from the shop. It is the place we went to the movies at. It is where we came on Friday night to dance at the local discothèque, and felt like we were at the center of the world...It was the liveliest tombstone<sup>11</sup> I have ever known' (Hosting, 2008: 219–220)

In line with the municipal quest to transform urban space, the third Biennale – slated for October 2012 but cancelled due to budgetary constraints – was designated to identify and capitalize on existing communal forces of the city. If the 2008 Biennale attracted visitors' attention to the streets through spectacle projects and the 2010 Biennale was a means to materialize already planned infrastructure improvements, then the 2012 Biennale, titled 'Metamorphosis,' was geared to capitalize on the capacities of marginalized residential groups by using artistic activism that would solidify

<sup>11</sup> 'Defenders' Square' is locally known as 'Kikar Ha'Matzeva' ('The Tombstone's Square') after the large stone-made monument commemorating residents of the city who had fallen during Israel's War of Independence.

(‘seal with a kiss’ as the curators have put it) the all-embracing cultural image of Bat-Yam. This time the call for projects explicitly asked for urban interventions that yield a significant (i.e. not temporary) change that stems from the possibilities, affordances and strengths embedded in the space of Bat-Yam and its community: “institutionalizing the energy that evolved in the first two events” (Interview, April 29, 2013). In short, first the “gates” of the “forbidden” city were opened conceptually and in practice, then, the long-needed infrastructure improvements were made and exhibited to the public, and finally, it was hoped, the last stains would have been removed through radiating the beauty of the true propensities of the stigmatized streets and people.

## Conclusions

Recent years have seen a broad range of towns and cities investing major efforts in devising culture-led urban strategies. These strategies have often been explained against the backdrop of economic neoliberalization that forced municipal administrations to re-invent the local in order to stimulate urban development and growth by attracting new residents, tourists and investors alike. In this context, scholarship has identified urban festivals and other flagship events as major drivers of urban regeneration. Considerably less attention has been paid to the role of festivals in the eradication of long-conceived territorial stigmas.

Using the case of Bat-Yam, this paper examined the extent to which an international art festival has sought to re-construct a defamed mid-sized city’s image. Specifically, we argued that the city-sponsored International Biennale of Landscape Urbanism, which was part of a broader culture-oriented municipal strategy, deployed creative means to breathe new meaning into some of Bat-Yam’s most entrenched stigmatized attributes. Long imagined as a socio-spatial mélange of poorly planned public spaces and unappealing urban populations, projects of the Biennale set to creatively experiment with these negative components and (re)-present them advantageously to locals and out-of-towners alike. Innovatively turning the city into a temporary ‘urban laboratory’, artists have redefined Bat-Yam’s spaces and practices by asking visitors to imagine density as complex relations between public and private and stigmatized population segments (e.g., Mizrahi youth) as welcoming residential hosts.

While assessing its actual level of success in regenerating the urban image is beyond the scope of this paper, the Biennale has effectively realized its key objectives. Not only has it managed to draw approximately 100,000 visitors to the city, many of whom were first-timers, but it further allowed them to see Bat-Yam’s ‘other’ side and experience it first hand, not through the lenses of stigma (see [Zandberg, 2010](#)). This was particularly true for the community of urban professionals in Israel, for whom the unmediated exposure bolstered a greater sense of interest in a city they often paid little attention to. From the perspective of urban residents, festivities evoked mixed feelings; though those we spoke with agreed that the Biennales was an important step in dismantling the stigma, they nonetheless questioned the wisdom of organizing a flagship event.<sup>12</sup> Others suggested that future events strive to better connect with local communities and link up specific projects to their everyday needs.

Clearly, though, a flagship event – as well thought-out as it might be – is in and of itself unable to entirely eradicate the urban stigma. An arduous process of (re)-making, (de)-stigmatization involves the articulation and association of alternative meanings to existing social and spatial objects ([Wacquant, 2007](#)). It is within

this context that one has to assess the perceived effectiveness of the Biennale. Its successful re-orientation of Bat-Yam’s image – in the eyes of residents, visitors, and participants – from a socio-spatially deviant city to a curious site of experimental explorations is illustrative. And while the Biennale is not the only reason for the recent increase in return migration of young adults to the city (see [Levy, 2008](#)), there is little doubt that the rigorous culture-oriented urban strategy continues to play a part in that positive process.

The Biennale has illuminated several important dimensions of the linkages between urban space, stigma and cultural strategies. Let us briefly attend to three of these, which could be usefully taken forward by urban scholars. Firstly, Biennales have drawn groups to the city, which are responsible for the representations of space ([Lefebvre, 1991](#); see [Duncan & Ley, 2013](#)). The (in)direct involvement of planners, architects and urbanists – all of whom had played a prime role in the translation of spatial ‘thought’ to ‘action’ by employing multiple physical forms to urban space, including maps, plans, models and designs – has been an important objective of activities. They imprinted the city – mostly the peripheral and overlooked settings – with fresh and creative understandings and experiences for everyone to absorb (municipal employees and elected officials, community members, and visitors). These professionals have been strategically designated by curators as spatial ‘agents of change’, capable of (re)-forming the techno-scientific community’s impression of the city.

Secondly, the Biennale showed that urban festivals are not necessarily confined to economic thinking. Although municipal authorities reported higher than average sales revenue during festivities, it was hardly their main objective. Changes in focus and attention by the three Biennales exemplify how culture-led strategies can become a means to challenge and transform existing urban order by working with, and strengthening the particularities of, the local. However, the 2008 Biennale was definitely produced within the “suited-for-all quick-fix” scheme. It exhibited spectacle projects that were dismantled and disappeared immediately after the event, most of which were too avant-garde to inspire Bat-Yam’s municipal planners. The 2010 Biennale overcame this shortcoming by focusing on urban infrastructure and by taking advantage of the events to progress large-scale improvements in the city. The third event, cancelled in mid preparation, was supposed to make the greatest movement towards what [Quinn \(2005\)](#) and others suggest as social-oriented culture-led urban redevelopment.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it seems that intentions guiding the Biennale were not to construct the global ‘festival gaze’ ([Garcia, 2004a](#)) by overshadowing the unsavory parts of the city as in Edinburgh or Barcelona; on the contrary, spotlights were directed specifically onto those places perceived most harshly or aesthetically devastating.

Finally, a recurring theme in the scholarly literature has been the extent to which festivals generate a sustainable social effect on local communities. Bat-Yam culture-led strategies to overcome its territorial stigma are an interesting example of urban remaking that, if fully executed, may stand out as a more sustainable mechanism. The essence of this mechanism is the reliance on and activation of autopoietic forces that are integral to the space and the community but were eclipsed for a long time by stigma.

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<sup>12</sup> Many claimed that municipal funding could have been put to a better use if channeled into infrastructural projects, or split between a few, smaller and less expensive cultural events.

<sup>13</sup> When asked before the 2010 Biennale what would constitute a successful event they noted “[T]hat projects remain in the aftermath of activities, that they would gain a life of their own, that they change and develop, that they bequeath others and spread globally” ([Timing, 2010:43](#))

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