

# Envisioning a 'Just Jerusalem'

## Contest focuses on the Holy City

By Lorne Bell  
Advocate Staff

Amid the chaos and violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, residents of the region's urban centers struggle to maintain some semblance of normalcy. But in Jerusalem, where political and diplomatic efforts have failed to bridge the gaps between diverse ethnic communities, academia is now stepping in.

Winners of the "Just Jerusalem" competition, a project co-sponsored by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for International Studies and Department of Urban Studies and Planning, have proposed several initiatives to bring Jerusalemites together.

"We are trying to widen the conversation about what could possibly be done in Israel and [the Palestinian territories] to make life better for people," said Diane Davis, professor of political sociology at MIT and director of the project. "We focused on the city of Jerusalem as the linchpin, and thought that the everyday issues of life in a city might be a source of more compromise and unity than larger questions about national space."

Davis heads the Jerusalem 2050 initiative, which draws upon the expertise of international scholars, activists, business leaders and urban planners to address the unique challenges Jerusalem faces. The Just Jerusalem competition – born out of the Jerusalem 2050 initiative in March 2007 – asked participants to submit proposals for projects that would draw upon the city's diversity and build a more united urban community.

An initial list of over 1,100 registered participants in 82 countries was eventually narrowed down to 125 eligible proposals, out of which the four winning proposals were selected. The authors of each proposal will be awarded fellowships at MIT this fall, where they will develop their concepts and discuss ways in which they can be implemented.

"The [selection] jury was looking for a combination of ideas that would address the city's physical, civic, symbolic and economic infrastructures to focus on the many different ways a city functions," said Davis.

The four winning proposals include the creation of a "Children's Village," a youth center where the youngest generations of Israelis and Palestinians would learn peaceful coexistence. A second project would link Jerusalem to a network of cities throughout the Middle East, building on themes of globalization and cross-cultural collaboration. Another proposal would bring Jerusalemites together around the region's rainfall shortage issues, while a fourth, titled

"Media Barrios," would use film and arts initiatives to connect isolated and underprivileged communities in the Holy City.

For Nitin Sawhney, a former MIT doctoral student and one of the authors of the Media Barrios proposal, Jerusalem represents an ideal setting to test the ways in which media and the arts might be used to build community.

"Our [team's] goal, first and foremost, was to interconnect the disenfranchised within Jerusalem," Sawhney said. "We felt that if we could create these interconnected entities across socioeconomic and cultural [boundaries], that could be a way to get people to engage in their own neighborhoods and other neighborhoods where some of that connection is being lost."

The Media Barrios would establish pilot programs in Kafr Aqab and the Shuafat Refugee Camp, two of the regions that have been separated from Jerusalem proper by the city's security walls. The programs would attempt to reconnect the regions' residents with the greater urban culture through film projects, festivals, artistic ventures and public media spaces.

"I felt that using cinema and the arts as a basis to talk about the issues of the whole conflict would be very powerful," said Sawhney.

But despite the competition's emphasis on fostering unity, many of the contest entries, including Sawhney's, touched upon politically sensitive issues. To avoid allegations of bias in the selection process, eight jurists were selected from around the world, including a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem and a Palestinian. Proposals were submitted anonymously and identified only by numbers.

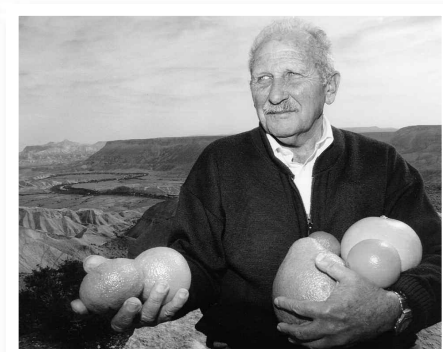
"We had a large, diverse and very capable jury," said William Mitchell, chair of the competition's selection panel and a professor of architecture, media arts and sciences at MIT. "Of course we all have biases and we all are subject to them, but those biases were challenged and had to be defended against very articulate people."

It is a unique and distinctly academic approach to discussing the conflict, and one that Davis hopes will create a "new triangulation of actors" working to solve the problems facing the region.

"We are not bypassing diplomatic channels, but we are not starting there because sometimes that can lead to getting caught up in the discourse of power struggles," said Davis. "We were more interested in the livability of the city, and that idea resonated with so many people."

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