Physical, Historical and social walls: barriers to transit use in a divided city, case study of young Palestinians in East Jerusalem

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Cities are walled and divided not just by physical infrastructure of walls and fences, but by historical collective memory and social norms. The physical urban structure, planning policies and personal identities can shape the daily habits of residents within cities to create de-facto division between neighbourhoods and sectors of the city, alongside or even instead of physical barriers. Mobility can be looked at as simply a service, but it is also the practical delineation of separation. Potential and practiced accessibility defines the city and its divisions for individuals and groups and can create separate spaces of familiarity, comfort and belonging which residents condition themselves not to cross. Barriers of transportation and access can thus shape a wall far and beyond physical borders.

Jerusalem is a multi-divided bi-national city. A seven-meter concrete 'security fence' splits the outer Eastern neighbourhoods of the city from its central core, Palestinian and Jewish, but a more subtle division exists within the city centre, dividing the Palestinian and Jewish cities without physical barriers. This division is shaped by the collective memory of the historical border of 1948-1967 between Israel and Jordan, national-identity and social norms. In this study, we examine the effect of both these walls, the visible and invisible, on the mobility practices of young Palestinian adults in East Jerusalem.

Even in cities with far less stark spatial, ethnic and political divides, transportation systems can function unequally. The famous Bus Rider's Union lawsuit of Los Angeles in the 1990's exposed the pattern of subsidization and investment in public transport which favoured the wealthy, the white and the riders of the train, even while most public transport users were low-income, disproportionally belonging to minority and immigrant groups, and bus riders. This population was both marginalized in the planning and investment of public transport and more reliant on it. Beyond racial and residential segregation, we also find further socio-spatial differentiation induced by transportation and mobility, reinforcing separate patterns of movement by residence, ethnicity, gender and even income. In light of recent initiatives to set physical borders, the importance of the Jerusalem case study is in examining the effects of decades of a regime of division and shifting physical barriers on daily habits and urban spaces in a binational city. Transportation systems not only provide a different quality of service to different populations, they can be seen to shape the urban form so as to promote further separation and inequality.

The study looks at the impact of the long-running planning policy of separation as well as the ongoing political and violent discourse on the mode choice of young Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Extensive research on the spatial evolution of Jerusalem over the course of 50 years of occupation demonstrates the political role of planning policy. The Palestinians city is systemically un-planned and under-funded in terms of public spaces, infrastructure and municipal services.

Two separate public transport systems exist in Jerusalem. A formal bus and light-rail system, closely integrated serves West Jerusalem and Jewish settlement areas. While signs and announcements exist in Arabic as well as Hebrew and Palestinian residents – from both East Jerusalem and other

areas within Israel – make use of the buses and the rail, these provide very little direct service to Palestinian neighbourhoods. Instead, a historically informal minibus system evolved serving destinations within the eastern half of the city, the greater (Eastern) metropolitan area and the Palestinian West Bank. This system was incorporated by the city in 2008, which enforced consistent livery, signs, a ticketing system and regulation of frequencies and capacity. At the same time the two remain separated, with different routes, operators and ticket prices and with only partial and ad-hoc integration to the light-rail and the bus system serving the western part. The systems overlap spatially only in a narrow area, although they are not integrated even there, and they are often served by different stops and ticketing system.

Research on mobility and transportation of the different national groups in the city, and particularly in East Jerusalem, is limited, but shows distinctly separate spheres for the two groups, with only a handful of shared spaces perceived with equal levels of comfort and belonging by both. These separations are, in a day-to-day sense, a product of self-policing and a strong sense among each population group of safety and danger across the city.

Transportation is both influenced by these patterns, and plays a role in shaping them. Incidents of verbal and physical violence have been broadly reported on public transport, as well as other public spaces in Jerusalem. The visibility and presence of transport infrastructure has a long history of serving as a flashpoint of conflict – from the presence of Arabic language announcements and signage, to buses and stations associated with the 'other side' encountering stoning of busses and attacks on station infrastructure.

Interviews with Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem indicate both a lack of physical accessibility and a strong sense of fear at using public transport perceived as serving primarily Jewish areas. A young woman, a student from East Jerusalem, stated that she preferred taking the car because of the poor accessibility by both systems from her neighbourhood to the university. She also mentioned the lack of accessibility to on-line information services. After a wave of Jewish-Palestinian clashes in the light-rail in the summer of 2014, one young woman reported "It took a year before I felt safe enough to take the light rail again, and another year before I felt comfortable enough to answer the phone in Arabic." She also reported a sense of discomfort speaking Arabic on public transport and in the western part of the city. Nevertheless, she did mention positively the efforts to provide signage in Arabic to her sense of well-being, although as a student at an Israeli university, she is a fluent Hebrew speaker. Because of the accessibility and the social climate barriers, except the university itself she never visits the western city for errands, entertainment or shopping, preferring the facilities available in East Jerusalem, time consuming travel across the border to Ramallah or exclusively the mixed, touristic zone near the old city.

Another Palestinian woman, who does commute daily to her workplace in the Western part of the city, also reported driving as her preferred mode, especially to work. Despite living close to the light rail and viewing it as a faster, more comfortable and cheaper option to her workplace she prefers to avoid taking the light-rail and instead takes the car because she feels fear and anxiety due to the perceived hostile environment, in particular during times of political tension. Moreover, she preferred to drive due to her sense of personal safety and avoid shared public spaces, having experienced a number of instances of verbal harassment in the Jewish areas of the city. Several women reported the importance of family norms that driving a car is safer than public transport. Several of the interviewed woman said that even though they can officially travel to the western part of the city, they are unfamiliar with the western neighbourhoods and thus avoid these parts of the city.

We use an internet survey to examine more broadly the attitudes and level of comfort towards the different modes available in the city and the barriers associated with use, whether geographical – availability of services in Palestinian neighbourhoods and access to destinations – or personal, such as fear, comfort, language and information barriers, cost and access to a vehicle and possession of a driver's license. We focus particularly on movement across the walls, the physical and the social, and look at the effectiveness of politics, policy and social climate, as well as infrastructure, in shaping mobility practices, the personal scope of the city for each resident, and the level of separation created.

The study helps to highlight accessibility difficulties due to systemic lack of connectivity and its role in limiting or restricting residents travel around the city, and at the same time the impact of political conflicts and urban segregation. As well as physical walls, the effect norms and social atmosphere on ostensibly mundane daily experiences plays a significant role in shaping travel habits for minority groups. The findings can help understand the negative effects of walls, either physical or historical, on social norms that impede the natural rhythm of city, on inclusive pluralism and spaces of trust in a world where cities become increasingly diverse.

As we can see in Jerusalem, inclusive transportation planning which provides equal potential for groups to move across the entire space of the city and create genuinely de-segregated spaces and transit systems – as we can learn from the case of Los Angeles, separate rarely means equal – has a substantial social component. Social climate and the perception of transit systems as spaces of danger and alienation limit mobility for minority groups and create a real barrier to parts of the city. Residents are left spatially separated, and also absorb norms that limit their behaviours even further within the sphere of what is provided.

Transportation systems, even without any deliberate planning, may conform to patterns of separation and cement them further. This research will help to identify the interaction between these physical and spatial components and in order to understand what aspects of mobility for minority groups can be improved. We look at how to facilitate greater individual mobility for individuals, but also how transit networks can support more inclusive and integrated cities with greater equality and comfort for all in shared public spaces and on public services.