The Poetics and the Politics of the Contemporary Sacred Place: Baba Sali's Grave Estate in Netivot, Israel

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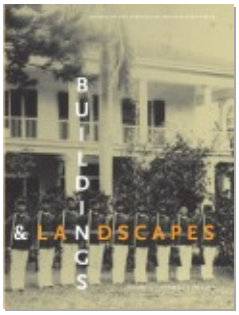

Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, Volume 16, Number 2, Fall 2009, pp. 73-85 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/bdl.0.0023*

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The Poetics and the Politics of the Contemporary Sacred Place

Baba Sali's Grave Estate in Netivot, Israel

Every winter on the fourth of *Shvat,* the fourth month of the Jewish calendar, thousands of adherents pack the dusty graveyard of the peripheral southern Israeli town of Netivot. They gather to celebrate the annual *Hilulla*—the celebration in memory of Rabbi Israel Abu-Hatsera—the Reverently "Baba Sali" who passed away in 1984. Already sanctified while alive—first in Morocco and after immigration to Israel, and as a successor of his holy father—his death awarded him a place of honor in the emerging saints' cult of modern Israel. The celebration lasts an entire day. It begins with the traditional parade from the private synagogue of the late Baba Sali to the central stage located in front of the family grave estate. Here, with an orchestra in the background, believers light candles and throw them into the nearby furnace, while praying and requesting good health, prosperity, and success. At the climax of the ceremony they enter the grave hall; men and women stand separated on each side of the grave. Meanwhile, at the other side of the compound, other people slaughter sheep or goats, prepare the meat for the big feast, and buy souvenirs in the small stands that pack the dusty compound (Figure 1).

Baba Sali's grave estate is located at the edge of the local cemetery. The 0.7-hectare compound is fenced, and the impressive stone-covered building constructed over the grave is dominant among the community's various graves, although lately new buildings threaten its primacy. The yard is circled with small sheds built of cheap materials, and a large furnace dominates the bare yard. In 1996, the site was declared by the Minister of Religious Affairs as one the State's sacred sites.

Our paper explores the architectural aspects in the making of a contemporary, sacred place in peripheral Israel. It interrogates the role played by the built environment in the modern sanctification of space, especially in relation to the various interpretations of the sacred in space as a substantial or a situational phenomenon. This paper is divided into four parts. The first defines the theoretical framework of the research, positioning the emergence of the sacred place between the poetic and the politic—the substantial and the situational. The second presents the historical-cultural context of the emergence of the saints' cult in modern Israel. Based on these frameworks, the third part presents our case study as a composite narrative, which integrates the poetic and the politic. The fourth part summarizes our findings and examines the local phenomenon in the broader context of

Figure 1. Annual celebration in Netivot. Baba Sali Association.

the making of contemporary sacred spaces. In sum, this paper assesses the ways the vernacular, the everyday, can be simultaneously sacred or extraordinary.

Theoretical Framework

What makes a space sacred? Scholars of religion advocate two different ways for viewing "sacred space." The early approach, which was the prevailing method from the 1950s until the 1980s, presupposes that sacredness is a substantial phenomenon, waiting to be discovered by human beings. The more recent approach perceives sacredness as a situational phenomenon, located in the nexus of human practices and social projects.[1]

Those who identify substantial sacredness with poetics derive their view from Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and mainly from the work of Mircea Eliade.[2] The last, a prominent scholar of religion, argued that sacredness is imbued in place since it serves as an *axis mundi*—a place that connects the earthly world with the divine world, and serves as an embodiment of the cosmological order. In his seminal book *The Sacred and the Profane,* Eliade claimed that the core of the sacred in place lies in its differentiation and separation from the secular and the everyday. While some natural environments are traditionally believed to be imbued with sanctity, architecture is commonly an agent in the enhancement of these characteristics.[3]

Sacredness as poetic invests architecture with the capacity to reveal the uniqueness of the place, materializing its substantial qualities. Working from within the ancient Platonic tradition that connects beauty and divinity, this view finds an aesthetic aura in the sacred place. Various scholars, such as Vincent Scully, Norberg Schultz, Thomas Barrie, and others defined the characteristics of the sacred architecture that were shared by different beliefs and were created in different geographical locations. Thomas Barrie argues in his book *Spiritual Path, Sacred Place* (1996) that "sacred architecture often provided a detailed 'symbol posted' way to spiritual transformation."[4] His investigation differentiates between three levels of meanings. The first is the overt representation of religious aspects on walls—in pictures, frescoes, statues, and stained glass; the second is the abstract symbolic meaning of forms, as manifested in the built environment in the form of architectonic uniqueness, spatial separation, and use of thresholds; and the third is the embodiment of the religious myth in the form of the architectural monument, the act of the ritual, and their interplay.

Generally, most institutional sacred sites are differentiated from their surroundings: they are larger than adjacent structures; constructed of more durable and expensive materials; their architectonic schema is more composite than is common in adjacent buildings, and it sometimes holds a morphological symbolic meaning. Moreover, the sacred site is often located in the most prominent location. In order to enhance this uniqueness, the sacred place is differentiated from its surroundings by walls, water barriers, or topography. The entrance to the sacred place is through thresholds, which are doorways that connect/disconnect the sacred and the profane. They turn the passage into a ritual, a process, and define levels of holiness from the most sacred to the profane. The poetics of sacred architecture converts the spiritual sacred experience into a tangible one, making the transition from the secular world to the sacred one a concrete path, and materializing the gates of heaven through the built monument.

The poetics of the sacred as formalized by Eliade and others has been critiqued by numerous scholars "as being essentializing and ultimately resting on a Western theological template."[5] Alternatively, and based on Lefebvre's perception of the social production of space, we need to recognize that human agents are located at the center of the sacred place. Chidester and Linenthal argue that "a sacred space is not merely discovered, or founded, or constructed: it is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests."[6] Instead of poetics, they argue for politics as the main vehicle in the creation of the sacred.

This view changes the role of architecture in the making of the sacred place. Lindsay Jones, in *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (2000), argues that architectural historians must be attuned to the "ritual-architectural" contemporary events

that are an integral part of any sacred space, and not restrict themselves to the "forever lasting" meaning of their creators.[7] In practice, an examination of the rich and diverse examples of modern sacred spaces reveals very few signs of common uniqueness among megachurches, home shrines, and other sites of religious practice, if at all. In his recent collection of essays titled *American Sanctuary,* Louis Nelson argues that places become inscribed as sacred through beliefs and practices, that these places are inextricably linked to sociopolitical identities, and that their meanings are not stable.[8]

Mapping the "new" geographies of religion, Lily Kong bridges these competing viewpoints and argues that "it is crucial to remember the intersection between the politics and the poetics of religious place, identity and community, rather than to treat them as inherently separate."[9] Drawing from various studies carried out during the past decade, she points to the potential for further research on the ways in which poetics is shaped by politics; or that poetics is perceived as immanent and real by the individual religious adherent amidst political troubles.

Kong's perspective serves as a general, conceptual framework for this study. Rather than exploring the grave estate of the holy Baba Sali solely as a substantial sacred place or a situational phenomenon, it analyzes the site through both lenses. Moreover, the relationship between architecture and ritual or practice, and between architecture and sociopolitical identities, becomes the focus of the study. How was the language of sacred architecture, as defined by Barrie and his colleagues, recently employed? Was it appropriated in order to grant the new sacred place a poetic aura? Was it used as a cliché or was it abandoned as irrelevant? The grave estate of the holy Baba Sali in peripheral Israel is an interesting arena to explore these questions, especially in the light of its historical and sociopolitical background.

Sources: Historical-Cultural Context

The Muslim saints' cult was a common phenomenon in Morocco and developed in parallel to institutionalized religion, mainly in the remote areas of the country. For a variety of reasons, local saints became foci for religious authority and political power.[10] In the introduction to his

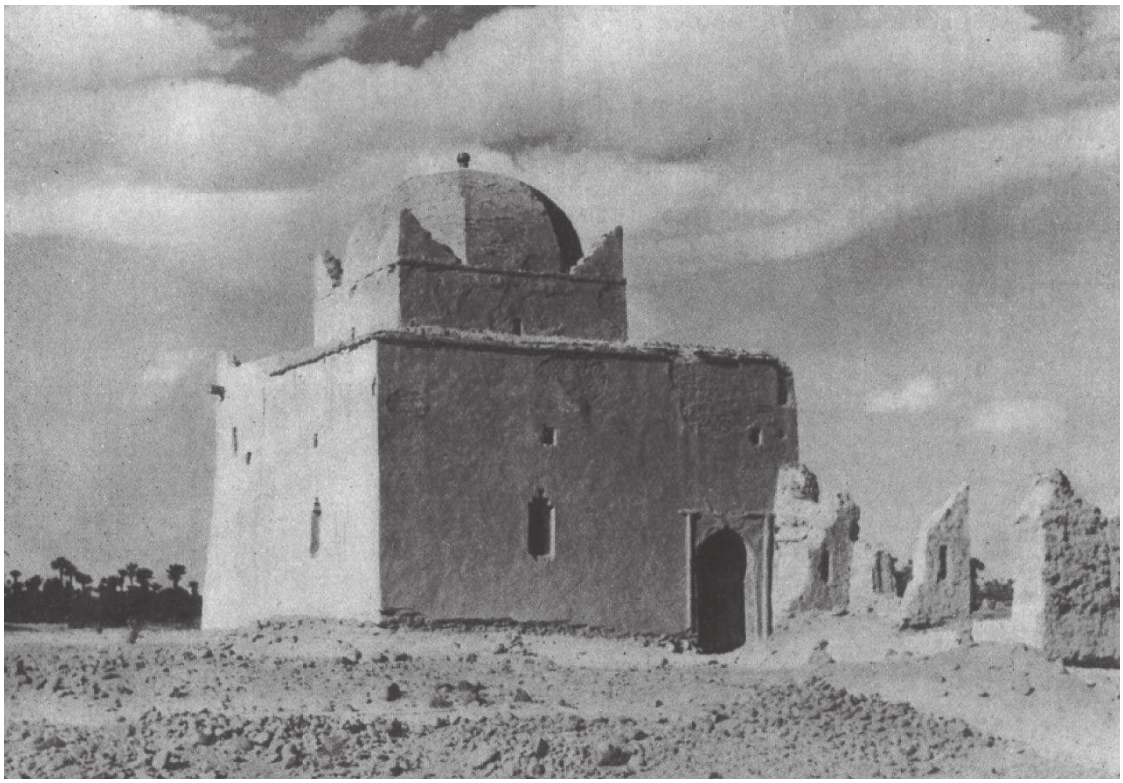


Figure 2. Muslim grave. E. Guerniere, ed., *Le Maroc,* 3rd ed., Paris, 1941.

book, *The Saints' Impresarios,* Yoram Bilu argues that the role of saints in monotheistic religions as mediators between the abstract, intangible god and his tangible adherents was reinforced in hierarchic Moroccan society, where middlemen were a necessity. Muslim saints were admired in their lives and even more in death. Their burial sites, sacred places containing the essence of their holiness and their unique abilities, became places of pilgrimage. But these burial sites hardly broadcast their distinction. Situated mostly in the outskirts of graveyards, on remote mountain peaks, or next to special trees or rocks, these graves were usually small cubic structures (Kube) covered by a dome and sometimes plastered with white mortar (Figure 2).

The structure was entered through a small door, and its ground remained bare, or was covered with rugs or mats. According to Muslim belief, the grave was intended to remind visitors of the living saint's earthly dwelling.[11] All year round and especially on the anniversary of the saint's death, the site became a pilgrimage destination as locals came to receive the blessing of the dead saint.

Moroccan Jews, who inhabited the country long before the Muslims arrived in the Maghreb, maintained complex relationships with local Muslims. Despite the differences in religion, ethnicity, and political status, they shared many beliefs and cultural habits with their neighbors. The saints' cult was one of these common cultural traditions, as manifested both in the ritual and in the architectural appearance of these sites. Almost every Jewish community was connected to a saint of its own. Dispersed throughout the country, their distribution mirrored the scattering of the Jewish communities all over Morocco. A total of 652 holy graves were identified by Issachar Ben Ami in his 1984 survey.[12] Most of these graves, which were located in local Jewish cemeteries, differ from their neighboring graves in very few details. Their tombstones were larger, and they were covered with a simple roof. Those located outside the cemeteries were situated next to a prominent cave or a tree. In case that a small structure was built to cover the tombstone, it was smaller than the usual Muslim Kube, less adorned, and usually lacked the dome structure.

From 1948 until 1961, almost a quarter million Jews emigrated from Morocco to the newly established State of Israel. They were part of the massive wave of immigration that tripled the population of the newborn state within three years. Officially, the "melting pot" policy of the state's authorities looked unfavorably upon the preservation of many unique cultural and social characteristics of the diverse groups of Jewish immigrants, who, apart from their common religious belief differed in all other traditions. In an effort to unify all Jewish people under the umbrella of the modern, secular, and Zionist state, the saints' cult was rejected along with other cultural habits. Traditional celebrations (Hilluloth) were modestly celebrated in private homes and synagogues.[13]

Nevertheless, Moroccan Jews and other Middle Eastern and North African Jews found new venues to preserve their saints' hagiolatry. They appropriated sacredness to local, old-time native pilgrimage sites, crowned contemporary rabbis as saints, and declared their living place or burial site sacred. Other venues for the creation of new sacred sites were based on dreams, and the re-interring of the remains of Jewish Moroccan saints in Israel.[14] According to Ben Ari and Bilu, the sanctioning of space by Moroccan Jews, which took place mainly in new, peripheral towns, "facilitated a process through which the inhabitants of these areas (once the reluctant or passive victims of arbitrary policies promulgated by the central government) actively contended with their situation, become more rooted in their localities and strengthened local patriotic sentiments."[15] In parallel, these newly created sanctuaries strengthened the community's ethnic individuality. As the years went by, saints' cult did not disappear, but rather became part of Israel's current multicultural identity. Furthermore, in Israel, a country in which there is very little separation between religion and state, saints' cult became part of the political arena.

While saints' cult drew the attention of anthropologists and sociologists,[16] it was relatively ignored by architectural critique. Built in the periphery and lacking the stamp of well-known architects, the architectural aspects of the new Israeli sacred spaces were hardly documented

and were considered marginal to the mainstream architectural discourse.[17] The third part of the paper discusses the emergence and the decline of the Baba Sali's sacred place in the peripheral southern town of Netivot as a composite narrative of architecture, ritual, belief, and sociopolitical situation.

The Architectural Aspects of the Baba Sali Sacred Grave Estate

Rabbi Israel Abu-Hatsera, the Baba Sali, was born in 1889 in Arpur, southern Morocco, to a prominent family. His modest way of life, which was devoted to studying, praying, and healing, earned him recognition equal to that enjoyed by his predecessors—and particularly his grandfather—Yaacov Abu Hatsera (1807–1880).

By the early 1950s, the Baba Sali emigrated to Israel, and in 1970 he finally settled in Netivot.[18] Upon his arrival, the family purchased two small apartments within a public row housing project to serve the family's needs as well as those of the growing community of adherents who went on pilgrimage to the Baba Sali's house. For eight years, the Baba Sali received his adherents in the small apartment that was attached to the family residence. Here they received the Rabbi's blessing and a bottle of water holding his unique healing powers. In 1978, the family broke through the wall that separated the two apartments and rearranged their space to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims (Figure 3).

Neither grandeur nor distinctiveness characterized the Baba Sali's small, standardized public housing apartment. However, the holiness of the rabbi conveyed to the conventional apartment an aura that expanded beyond its walls. The Baba Sali's room, where he received his adherents, became the core of the apartment and its source of sacredness. The rest of the apartment was converted into a waiting room for more privileged guests, while others waited in an outside shed. The new arrangement followed the expansion of sacredness from the Baba Sali's room, the sanctuary, to the entire apartment and its surroundings. As the family moved to its new spacious villa in 1981, the sacredness of the apartment disappeared, and today there is no sign at all to mention that the Baba Sali lived there.

Figure 3. Baba Sali apartment (on the first floor). Photograph by Liat Vardi.

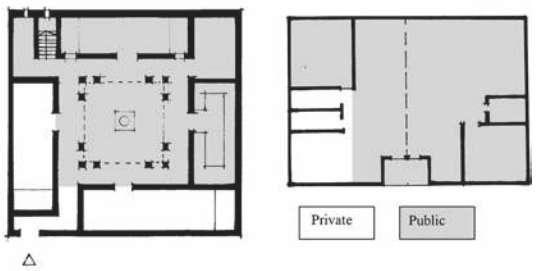
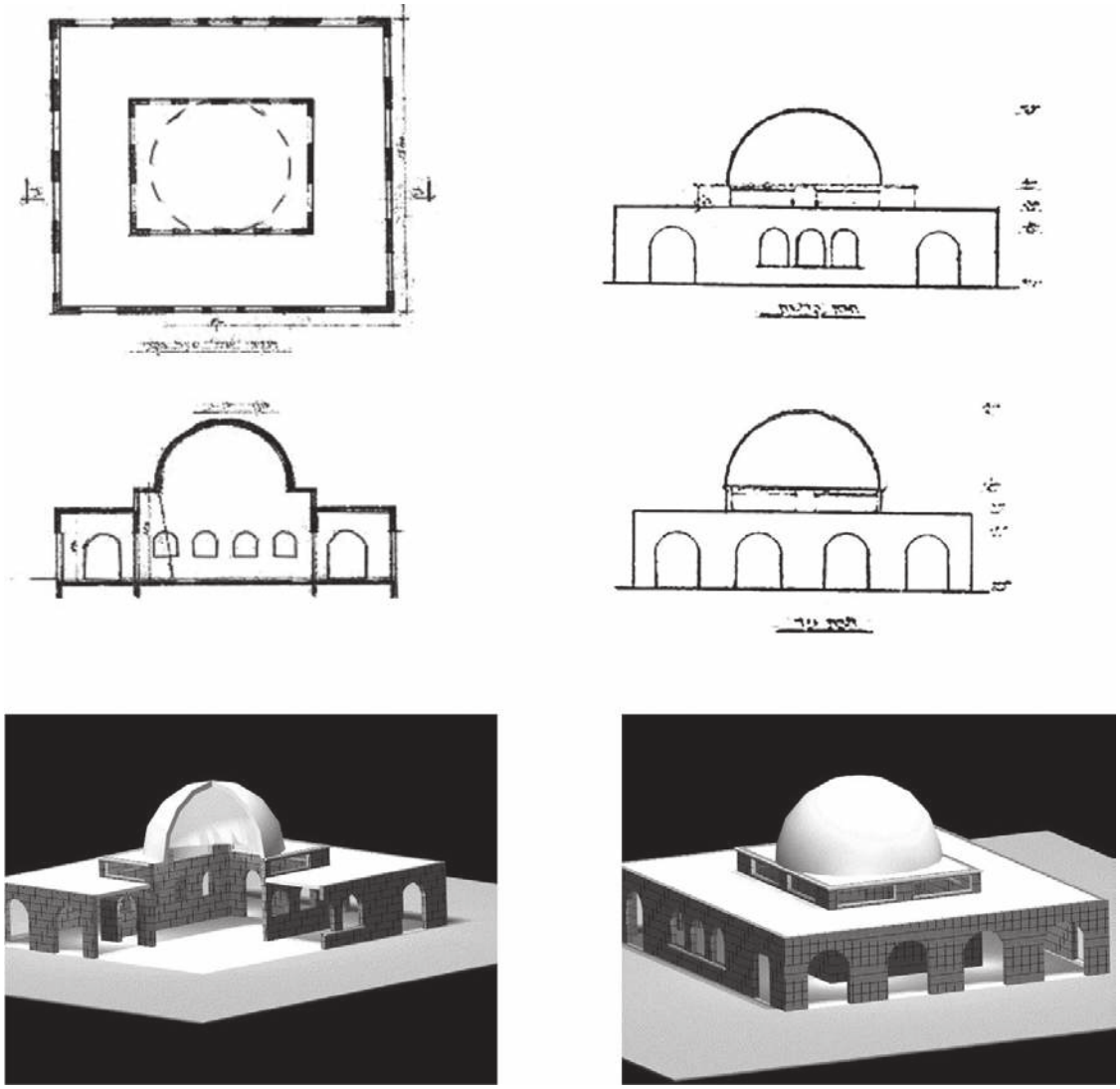


Figure 4. Traditional Jewish dwelling in Morocco (left) and the new layout of the Baba Sali's apartment (right).

The emergence of sacredness in the small public housing apartment followed the emergence of the Moroccan community life in their new homeland. Introducing the traditional saints' cult into the Israeli landscape was a way of both preserving and enhancing ethnic identity, and—as argued by Eyal Ben Ari and Yoram Bilu—establishing roots in the local landscape.[19] The growing visibility of the sanctuary, first hidden behind the anonymous public row housing façade, and later sending outdoor signs (waiting shed), reflected the emerging power of the Moroccan community in its confrontation with the state's melting-pot policy. Within this context, breaking the walls of the public housing apartment may be explained as a symbolic provocation against the common order of public housing in Israel. This order was based on a modern, efficient, single-purpose design and stood in great opposition to the traditional layout of the Moroccan house, in which most of the space was multifunctional, serving various activities: eating, praying, holding ceremonies, and so on (Figure 4).

In the winter of 1984, the Baba Sali passed away and was buried on the outskirts of the local cemetery, within a small, enclosed compound

Figure 5. The 1985 grave estate. Scheme, Netivot Archive. Model, Tal Uziel.



(less than 700 meters square). The grave was differentiated from the nearby headstones by its larger size and by two steps leading to it. A year later, the family built a small structure, shaped like the traditional Kube, above the gravestone. The structure was circled by a roofed colonnade, with twelve arched openings and fourteen windows. The entire cement structure was coated with stone (Figure 5).

As a sanctuary, the site was differentiated from its surroundings by its greater size, by the low fence that surrounded it, and by architectonic and symbolic means, such as perfected geometry, both in plan and in cross-section. These reinforced the clear hierarchy of sacredness: from the holiest tomb to the Kube, the yard, the rest of the cemetery, and the surrounding landscape. Sacredness was already embedded in the local region, as Netivot is located a short distance from the biblical site of Grar, where Abraham, the biblical patriarch, erected his tent as he arrived in Canaan.[20]

With its protruding white dome and its symmetrical scheme, the structure was very similar to the gravesite of Baba Sali's grandfather, on the outskirts of the cemetery in Damanhur, Egypt (Figure 6). Following the death of the Baba Sali, his son Baruch Abu Hatsera nominated himself as his successor, calling himself Baba Baruch. Equipped with political ambition, organizational skills, and municipal support, Baba Baruch translated the national political changes of the

late 1970s into a personal and familial success.[21]

His construction projects,[22] mainly the building and renovation of the Baba Sali's villa, the building of the nearby rabbinical college in the shape of an Islamic Madrasa, and the development of the grave estate, signified the post–melting pot era. As argued by the anthropologist A. Weingrod, the Baba Sali's Moroccan-style rabbinical college in Netivot, similar to the Brooklyn-style house of the leader of the Chabad movement in Kfar Chabad,[23] were manifestations of the Diaspora as part of the local identity.[24] Furthermore, he argues that the Moroccan-style building of Netivot "is a statement of legitimate cultural and political power, and it consequently represents an attack on the Ashkenazi hegemony, while the media attack, led by the elite censors, aims at maintaining the older centers of power and privilege."

In summary, the saints' cult that was oppressed during the first days of nationhood and that began emerging during the late 1970s in the Baba Sali's apartment became a prominent symbol of Israel's "others" politics of identity throughout the 1980s. Among the various manifestations of the emerging multiculturalism was the making of the Moroccan celebration of the Mimuna into a national fest, and making the Mediterranean, Eastern popular music a prominent genre besides the more Western style. The Maghreb style of decoration became an agent in the externalization of these social and cultural changes, primarily in the residential quarter of Netivot but also in its cemetery compound.

The growing charisma of the deceased Baba Sali and his son's industriousness brought from 40,000 to 60,000 adherents to the annual celebrations on the anniversary of the Baba Sali's death by the mid-1990s. Consequently, the existing grave compound became too small to accommodate the growing population of adherents, and the Baba Baruch initiated a new scheme for the compound (1989). With the State lease of almost 0.7 hectares of land to the Baba Sali Association, the scheme of the Moroccan-origin architect Avi Zorfati multiplied the area of the site by ten, adding new amenities and tripling the built area. The renovated burial structure was covered with stone, with a toothlike decoration on the upper part of the walls. The Kube, with its surrounding arches and its simple and coherent design, lost its lucidity as various new rooms were added to the original structure, preserving its inner core—the tombstone—but blurring the original simple composition. The place was remodeled as a synagogue, and a seminary and a souvenir shop were added next to it. The main burial hall was divided by a screen, separating the men's area from the women's area, and the Baba Sali's wife's tomb was built next to the women's gallery. Inner decoration was very limited, and with the exception of a large lamp, the building was characterized by its modesty and simplicity (Figure 7).

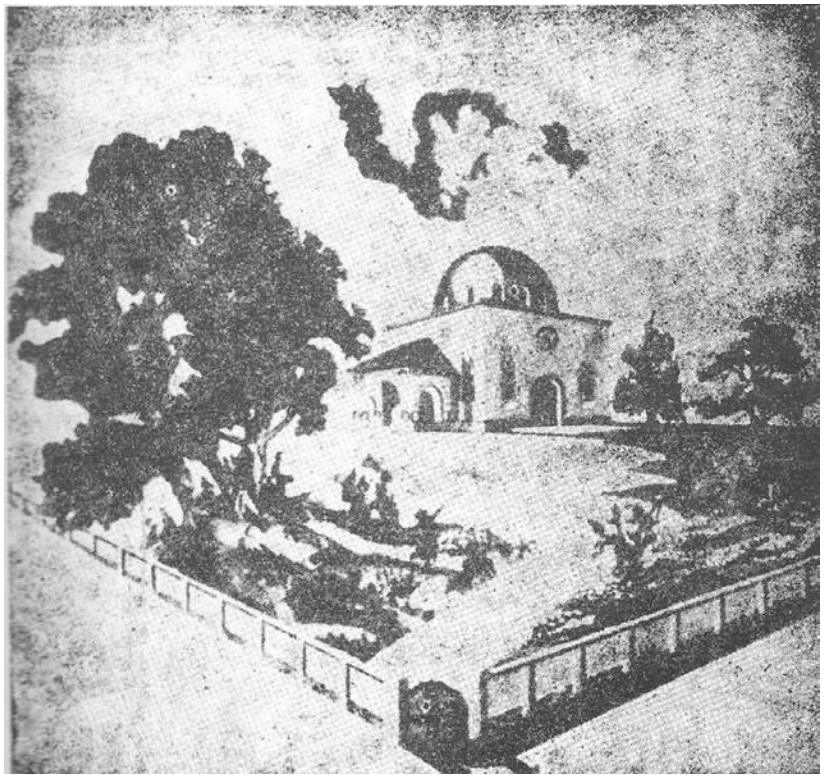


Figure 6. Rabbi Yaacov Abu Hatsera's grave in Egypt. Yad Ben Zvi Library.

Some of the design elements were of Maghreb origin, such as the tooth decoration around the outer envelope of the building. This type of decoration appeared in the twelfth-century Kutubiya minaret in Marrakesh, Morocco, as well as other religious sites in Morocco.[25] The development of the compound included an additional new celebration shed, slaughtering area, warehouses, and offices. The development standard was very low, and was characterized by cheap asphalt surface and structures made of tin. In contrast to the early symbolic fence that separated the site from its surroundings, a new high fence with simple

Figure 7. Interior of the Baba Sali grave estate. Baba Sali Association.

Figure 8. The furnace. Baba Sali Association.

gates was installed around the compound. The new stone wall prevented visitors from viewing the compound and its internal affairs, broke the connection between the grave and the adjacent cemetery, and forced each visitor to pass inspection by the guards on site. In summary, the previous simple and coherent space gave way to a more functional design, accommodating the site to serve the ritual of the thousands.

The activity of Baba Baruch and his father's adherents peaked during the second half of the 1990s. In 1996, the compound was declared by the Minister of Religious Affairs as one the State's sacred sites, bringing many new visitors to the site in addition to Israelis of Moroccan descent. Among the attendants were not only the elite of the Orthodox Jewish establishment but also politicians representing the broad spectrum of the political arena. Although Baba Baruch and his community came to be identified with a distinct political party, which emerged as the third largest party in Israel,[26] the annual celebration became a symbol of multicultural Israel (Figure 8).

Social and cultural prosperity were architectonically manifested. The building boom initiated by the Abu Hatsera family did not stop at the gates of the cemetery; it extended to the residential quarter of Netivot—and in a more extroverted manner. A new campus was built next to the small rabbinical college, and the Baba Baruch initiated the preparation of a master plan for a new neighborhood that would connect these institutions with the cemetery. The scheme prepared by the court's architect Zorfati aspired to recreate the "Mallah," the traditional North African Jewish dwelling quarter, within the modern-style urban fabric of Netivot. It included an open space museum, a market, an art center, and luxurious residences, intended mainly for foreign residents drawn to the unique atmosphere of the quarter.

In parallel, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) planted a nine-hectare public park not far from the cemetery for the benefit of the *Hillula*-celebration attendants. Designed in the shape of the North African and Mediterranean symbol, the Hamsa, the site was intended to incorporate other elements found in Moroccan gardens (Figure 9). The JNF expected to receive financial assistance covering the construction costs of the park from wealthy Moroccan Jews; however this never materialized.

While the grave estate preserved its popular and unpretentious appearance, architecture and planning of the rabbinical institutions and the residential quarter became a primary vehicle in expressing Baba Baruch's wealth and political power. These planning and building projects challenged the modernist conception of Israel's new towns. They were based on images of vernacular architecture and were aimed to fabricate a nostalgic theme park, reminiscent of the lost homeland of Morocco.

Over the past few years there has been a constant decline in visitation of the Baba Sali's grave estate. Only 2,000 people arrived for the 2006 celebration,[27] while during the 1990s their number reached 50,000.[28] Despite recent support by state agencies aimed at reviving the annual celebration, Baba Baruch's rabbinical court lost its former position of importance. Today, the Baba Sali's compound is overshadowed by the grandi-

Figure 9. The Hamsa Park. Rubi Amir, Landscape Architect.

ose cut pyramid over the tomb of Rabbi Shalom Ifargan. The prosperity of the relatively new court diminishes the old compound of the Baba Sali's, which is slowly deteriorating.

But the sacredness of the site does not disappear. Even the small stones that cover the dusty yard have been pressed into service. A clever entrepreneur embeds the stones in two-inch Perspex cubes, and sells these on the site and over the Internet for $50 per cube (Figure 11).

Current changes in the Baba Sali's compound reflect the demographic change within Israeli society since the early 1990s, when Russian immigrants thronged to Israel and changed the balance of power among Israel's various ethnic groups. Almost one million immigrants, who mainly settled in Israel's peripheral towns, turned Netivot's community into a more diverse one. Consequently, Baba Sali's adherents lost their status within the local municipality and were no longer prioritized as before. Furthermore, other Moroccan saints emerged in the town and attracted new adherents.

Summary and Discussion

Neither poetics nor politics can serve as sole categories for discussing the role of architecture in the creation of modern sanctuaries. As argued by Kong, "it is crucial to remember the intersection between the politics and the poetics of religious place, identity and community, rather than to treat them as inherently separate."[29] Our discussion emphasizes these intricate relations, highlighting the role of architecture in the modern sacred place. The first part of the discussion situates our case study between the poetics and

the politics. The second part discusses the role of tradition in the making of the sacred place in Netivot. The third and last part speculates on the role of architecture within the global arena of modern popular sanctuaries.

Baba Sali's sacred grave estate is viewed neither as a substantially sacred place, nor solely as a product of sociopolitical power relations within Israeli society. Alternatively, we would argue that the poetics of the site and its essential sacredness are negotiated by various political and cultural agents that manipulated the language of substantial, sacred architecture for their needs.

The poetics of the grave estate is inherent in its setting, in the biblical land of Abraham the patriarch, and, more specifically, where he built his tent as he settled Canaan. Furthermore, the cemetery's ground is sacred, as it holds the remains of the deceased Baba Sali, who was already sanctified during his lifetime. In the past, this sacredness was imbued into the small public housing apartment where the Baba Sali lived; it disappeared as he left the apartment, making sacredness an unstable phenomenon.

But the sacredness of the late Baba Sali is more closely connected to his persona than to his burial place. The site is important not in itself but rather as a location for rituals. One actually *uses* a popular sacred place, rather than simply being *impressed* by it, argued the anthropologist Weingrod.[30] Consequently, the nature of the ritual dictates the nature of the place, and ritual in this case is simple and popular. There is very little order, hierarchy, and formality in the annual celebration of the Baba Sali, as well as in the daily visits to the site. With the exception of gender separation within the burial site, the space is egalitarian. Movement within it is free and undirected. Ordinary activities, such as flock slaughtering, the feast itself, and the commercial activities, comprise the essence of the celebration, and they are echoed in the architecture of the compound. There is no need for a fancy environment for barbecuing or for selling souvenirs. The grave estate constitutes an integral part of the compound and its activities. Even though the site was institutionalized and was officially recognized as one of the State of Israel's sacred sites, its character was not drastically altered to resemble hegemonic religious institutions. A careful examination of the building—its design, materials, inner decoration, and construction details, despite the outward appearance of grandeur, reveals its simplicity and modesty. It stands in sharp contrast to the rabbinical institutions built by Baba Baruch, and the nearby monumental grave estate of Rabbi Shalom Ifargan, which inspires awe and religious excitement among its visitors.

Figure 10. Shalom Ifargan's grave estate. Photograph by Liat Vardi.

As no financial constraints limited the construction of the site, we would argue that the modest, at times even shabby appearance of the site was intentional, corresponding to the essence of the Baba Sali's cult, which is popular and based on an intimate relationship between the dead saint and his community of adherents. The rabbinical institutions, which were distinct in their size and their architectonic style, serve other purposes, emphasizing politics over poetics.

The grave estate, the rabbinical institutions, and the various planning proposals reflect the emergence of the Moroccan community and its politics of identity within Israeli society. The process started almost secretly within the small public housing apartment, in which both the rejection of the saints' cult and the State's housing norms were challenged. The relocation to the spacious villa and the ensuing construction projects of Baba Sali's heir, Baba Baruch, reflect the dramatic political change that occurred in the late 1970s, and the emerging power of ethnic

political parties—both on the municipal and the national levels. The court's buildings (the villa and the rabbinical institutions) were constructed as a show of power of the Baba Sali's court vis-à-vis the Ashkenazi rabbinical college located in the adjacent neighborhood, and were intended to attract students from all over the country to join the college. The adoption of the Maghreb style for the educational institutions reflects this tendency. As argued by Weingrod, they were manifestations of the Diaspora as part of the local, ethnic identity. The climax of this process—the proposal to connect the residential neighborhood with the grave estate in a mixed-use project built in the style of the "Mallah"—sharply contrasted with the modern scheme of Netivot, which was planned and constructed on the basis of modern planning schemes, rejecting the traditional vernacular building style of the Diaspora.

The current decline in the grave estate's visitation is due to the fact that other saints' cults have flourished both in Netivot and in other locations throughout the country, as well as to the change in Netivot's demography. Consequently, Baba Baruch's court lost its priority within the local municipality, affecting its ability to realize his ambitious construction projects. The grave estate, which was originally designed to serve the adherents wishing to experience a popular ritual at a modest, unpretentious place, seems today to be more vulnerable than ever. Shalom Ifargan's monumental grave estate presently attracts a much larger number of adherents.

The Baba Sali's grave estate emphasizes the role of tradition in the emergence of a modern sanctuary, tradition not in the sense of frozen spatial and ritual practices but rather as a conceptual framework. The essence of saints' hagiolatry in Morocco was the celebration of food, wine, and religious ecstasy next to the saint's tomb at the edge of the local cemetery, facing the desert. The tomb itself was a marker within its surroundings. It was relatively small and modest; an abode for a ritual, not an object to be cherished. The first Kube built in 1984 over the tomb of the Baba Sali was a replica of Baba Sali's grandfather's tomb in Egypt and resembled other common sites in Morocco. The two phases of its renovations did not alter the entire significance of the site. True, its area multiplied, it was covered with stone, and new functions were added to it, but the core meaning of the gravesite and its adjacent compound remained the same: a place of popular ritual.

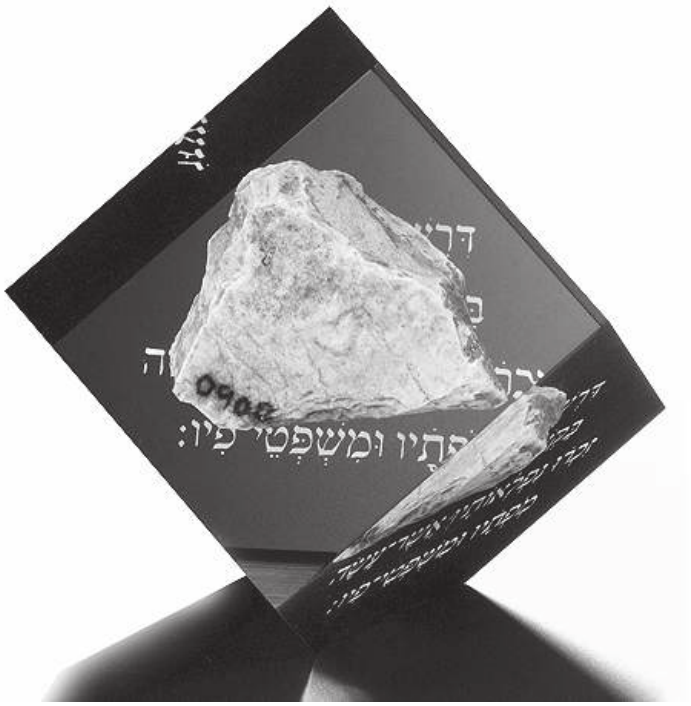


Figure 11. Stone from Baba Sali's compound.

Some of the architectonic elements of the grave estate are of Maghreb origin, such as the projections on the tomb's walls, the arched windows, and the vaulted ceilings. They echo the language of Islamic sacred architecture, which was transformed by time, geographic relocation, and economic and cultural barriers. Whether the appropriation of these elements exploited the language of the substantial sacred architecture in order to award an aura to the newly invented sacred place, or whether it merely expressed the legitimacy of the "Diaspora" in the emerging architectural repertoire of mid-1980s Israel, requires a further investigation.

The peripheral grave estate of the Baba Sali and its adjacent built and "on paper" building projects exemplify Nelson's claim that place is inscribed with sacredness through beliefs and practices, that it is inextricably linked to sociopolitical identities, and that its sacredness is unstable. These characteristics reject the "aura"

of the sacred religious place as irrelevant. This being the case, it is worth examining whether architecture matters at all in the creation of sacred modern places. Our case study hints that it is barely significant, a claim that is supported by the indifference of the architectural critique to the site and its architectural genre. Furthermore, with no intellectual discussion, and due to the abundance of architectural images of sacredness from all over the world, architectural clichés, third-order replicas, and two-dimensional symbols dominate the field as poor sources of inspiration. The park shaped as a Hamsa seen only from the air best demonstrates this claim. Alongside it, other elements are also merely visual images "cut and pasted" in the quick process of making a new sacred place. Whether it is a matter of time or a matter resulting from the essence of the modern sacred place, the architectonic poetics of the new sacred place is worth considering.

NOTES

1. David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 5.

2. Mircea Eliade, "Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred," in *The Sacred and the Profane,* 8–65 (London: Harcourt, 1987).

3. Extensive literature discusses the character, meaning, construction, and activity of the natural and the built sacred place. To mention a few, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974); Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture,* rev. ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979); Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1975); Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

4. Thomas Barrie, *Spiritual Path, Sacred Places Myth, Ritual and Meaning in Architecture* (Boston: Nass Shabhala, 1996).

5. Elizabeth McAlister, "Globalization and the Religious Production of Space," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 3 (2005): 249–55, esp. 250.

6. Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space,* 15.

7. Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison* (Distributed by Harvard University Press for Harvard University for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000).

8. Louis Nelson, *American Sanctuary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 5–6. Other scholars who hold a similar approach are Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); J. Bereton "Sacred Place," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1995); and Paul Devereux, *The Sacred Place: The Ancient Origin of Holy and Mystical Sites* (London: Cassell Press, 2000).

9. Lily Kong, "Mapping 'New' Geographies of Religion: Politics and Poetics in Modernity," in *Progress in Human Geography* 25, no. 2 (2001): 211–33.

10. Yoram Bilu, *The Saint Impresarios: Dreamers, Healers, and Holy Men in Israel's Urban Periphery* (Hebrew) (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2005), 29.

11. Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 242–51, 253–331.

12. Issachar Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration among the Jews in Morocco* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

13. Yoram Bilu, "Moroccan Jews and the Shaping of Israel's Sacred Geography," in *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel and America,* eds. Deborah Dash-Moore and Ilan Toren, 72–86 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); Yoram Bilu, "The Sanctification of Space in Israel: Civil Religion and Folk-Judaism," in *Jews in Israel,* eds. Uzi Rebhun and Chaim I. Waxman, 371–93 (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

14. Bilu, "The Sanctification of Space in Israel."

15. Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu, *Grasping Land: Space and Place in Israeli Discourse and Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 77.

16. Alex Weingrod, "The Saints Marching Ahead: Comparison between North Africa and Israel," in *Recherches sur la culture des juifs d'Afrique du Nord* (Hebrew), ed. Issachar Ben Ami, 149–56 (Jerusalem: Vaad Hamaravim in Jerusalem Press, 1991); Haim Saadon and Y. Frenkel, "Saints Cult," in *Israel Communities in the East during the 19th and the 20th Centuries—Morocco,* ed. Haim Saadon, 263–73 (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport, Ben Zvi

Institute for the Research of Israel Communities in the East).

17. An exception is the paper of the anthropologist Alex Weingrod who examined the house of the leader of the Chabad movement and the grave estate of the Baba Sali as two examples of using Diaspora's architecture as a tool in the struggle over cultural hegemony. Alex Weingrod, "Changing Israeli Landscape: Buildings and the Uses of the Past," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 30 (1993): 370–87.

18. The small town that was established only fourteen years earlier (1956) was mostly populated by Jewish immigrants originating in North Africa, mainly from Morocco. Built by the Ministry of Construction and Housing as part of the state's population dispersal policy, the twelve thousand inhabitants' field town was mainly intended to supply services to its adjacent rural area.

19. Ben-Ari and Bilu, *Grasping Land*.

20. Bilu, "Moroccan Jews."

21. In 1977, the generation's governance of the socialist parties was substituted by a right-wing nationalistic regime. Supported heavily by Moroccan Jews and other descendents of non-European Israelis, the switch in power was a turning point in Israeli politics and cultural sphere.

22. Already in the early 1980s Baba Sali's son convinced his father to move into a spacious villa in the neighborhood. The 800-meter-square villa was defined, according to the local building codes, as a public institution. Most of its ground floor was allocated for public activities such as celebrations, praying, feasting, and ritualistic bathing. After his father's death in 1984, the son renovated the villa and turned it into a spacious palace-like dwelling, adorned with Maghreb-style decorations. With extensive support from the local municipality, the State authorities, and the Baba Sali's adherents, a rabbinical college covering an area greater than 1,000 meters square was built next to the house. Similarly to the renovated villa, this building also echoed the Moroccan architectural and décor style.

23. The Chabad movement is one of the largest Hasidic movements in Orthodox Judaism. Its center is located in Brooklyn, N.Y., and its adherents established a village in central Israel in 1949.

24. Weingrod, "Changing Israeli Landscape; Buildings and the Uses of the Past," 370–87.

25. Richard B. Parker, *A Practical Guide to Islamic Monuments in Morocco* (Charlottesville, Va. The Baraka Press), pl. 5.

26. Bilu, *The Saint Impresarios*.

27. Daniel Ben Simon, *Haarz,* February 4, 2006 (Hebrew).

28. Yoram Bilu, "Veneration of Saints and Pilgrimage to Sacred Sites as a Universal Phenomenon," in *To the Tombs of the Righteous: Pilgrimage in Contemporary Israel,* ed. R. Gonen, 11–26 (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1998).

29. Kong, "Mapping 'New' Geographies of Religion," 211–33.

30. An interview with the anthropologist Alex Weingrod, 2005.