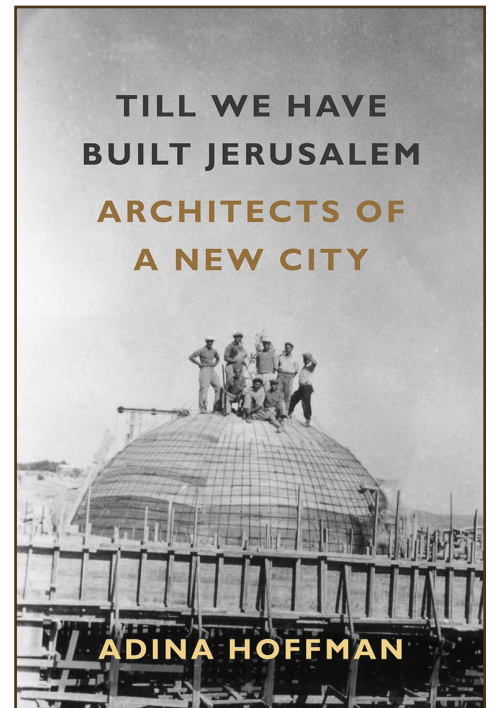


Reading Group Gold

Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architects of a New City

by Adina Hoffman



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A remarkable view of one of the world's most beloved and troubled cities, Adina Hoffman's *Till We Have Built Jerusalem* is a gripping and intimate journey into the very different lives of three architects who helped shape modern Jerusalem.

The book unfolds as an excavation. It opens with the 1934 arrival in Jerusalem of the celebrated Berlin architect Erich Mendelsohn, a refugee from Hitler's Germany, who must reckon with a complex new Middle Eastern reality. Driven to build in terms both practical and prophetic, Mendelsohn is a maverick whose ideas about Jerusalem's political and visual prospects place him on a collision course with his peers. Next we meet Austen St. Barbe Harrison, Palestine's chief government architect from 1922 to 1937. Steeped in the traditions of Byzantine and Islamic building, this "most private of public servants" finds himself working under the often stifling and violent conditions of British rule. And in the riveting final section, Hoffman herself sets out through the battered streets of today's Jerusalem searching for traces of a possibly Greek, possibly Arab architect named Spyro Houris. Once a fixture on the local scene, Houris is now utterly forgotten, though his grand, Armenian-tile-clad buildings still stand, a ghostly testimony to the cultural fluidity that has historically characterized Jerusalem at its best.

We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group's experience of this beautifully written rumination on memory and forgetting, place and displacement, and on what it means, everywhere, to be foreign and to belong.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Till We Have Built Jerusalem* is a portrait of three very different architects who helped to build the modern city of Jerusalem. Each of them came from somewhere else and brought with them certain ideas about building and life, even as they learned important things from the city itself. How would you describe what drew each architect to come and work in this context? What were they looking for, and how did they learn from what they found there?
2. In the opening section, “Beyond Jaffa Gate,” Adina Hoffman writes of two different dimensions to her experience of walking around modern Jerusalem. She describes “what I see” and “what I don’t see.” What does she mean by these terms in relation to each other and the city? What *doesn’t* she see, and why doesn’t she see it? What *does* she see? How is this similar or different from your own experience of walking around and observing the place where you live? Is Jerusalem unique in terms of what is visible and invisible, or is what she’s describing true of every city?
3. Why does Hoffman characterize the book as “an excavation” at the end of this opening section? Where and how does this notion return throughout the book, and what is the effect of this image?
4. How would you characterize Erich Mendelsohn? What is his relationship to building in general, and to building in Palestine in particular? How do the comments made by his wife, Luise, color your view of his character? How does the commentary from other people affect your sense of his personality and his approach to his work and to other people?
5. This is a book about building in a literal sense—about construction in stone and mortar—but it’s a book about building in other ways as well. What other sorts of building are taking place in the “Jerusalemstrasse” section? Who are some of the other builders at work here, and what is it that they hope to construct? How are their visions of what they’d like to build similar to, or different from, plans like Mendelsohn’s? Are these “builders” able to construct what they’d envisioned? Was Mendelsohn? Why or why not?
6. What is the basis of Mendelsohn’s critique of many of the other European-born Jewish architects working in Palestine during his time there? How does he characterize his visions for the architectural future of the country in contrast to theirs? What would he like them to understand about the country and the landscape that he feels they don’t? How do his ideas about architecture in this context relate to his political ideas about the future of the country?
7. How does politics affect the process of building throughout the book? What are the effects of “current events” on the ability of the three architects to see their building plans through? How does each of the architects respond to these challenges?
8. Austen St. Barbe Harrison is a very different sort of character from Erich Mendelsohn. How would you characterize him in relation to Mendelsohn? How are the quotations from his own

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letters tonally distinct from those Mendelsohn wrote and which are quoted in the book? What does this tell you about him?

9. Consider the quote from the William Blake poem that appears on page 139. How does this relate to the section of the book about Harrison, (“Beautiful Things Are Difficult”), and how does it relate to the book as a whole? Why do you think the book has the title it does?
10. Both Mendelsohn and Harrison left Jerusalem. Why? Why do you think Harrison uses the term “escape” to describe his leaving? What made things so difficult for him there?
11. In the course of the book, we meet various supporting players who have an important role to play. These include Salman Schocken, Else Lasker-Schüler, Chaim Yassky, David Bomberg, Eric Gill, Heleni Efklides, Khalil Sakakini, Yom-Tov Hamon, E. T. Richmond, David Ohannessian, and C. R. Ashbee. What role do these different figures play in the story? How does this range of people from various backgrounds affect your sense of Jerusalem’s history and culture?
12. Why do you think Hoffman’s quest for the traces of Spyro Houris was so difficult? What were the specific challenges she faced in trying to unearth his history that she did not face when writing about Mendelsohn and Harrison? Are there cultural, political, or personal reasons that his footsteps were so hard to follow?
13. Hoffman sets out looking for Houris in the middle of the Gaza War in the summer of 2014. Why does the timing of her search matter? How does the presence of the war in the background affect her search for this forgotten figure? Why do you think the last section, “Where the Great City Stands,” lists two dates for its starting point: 1914 and 2014? What is important about 1914, and how does that relate to 2014?
14. If you were looking for someone in your town or city who you knew had once been important but who had been almost entirely forgotten, where and how would you look? What kinds of records would you turn to? Who would you talk to? What other methods could you use to find her or him? How is a quest for someone like Spyro Houris, in a city like Jerusalem, similar or different? Are there particular challenges to such a search in the context of the Middle East?
15. How would you compare the kinds of papers left behind by figures like Luise and Erich Mendelsohn, Austen Harrison, Ronald Storrs, Yom-Tov Hamon, and C. R. Ashbee and those left by Spyro Houris? How have these papers been preserved and why? How does the “Rock Paper Scissors” epilogue relate to this question?
16. How does Hoffman’s description of Alexandria at the end of the book relate to Jerusalem? What is the connection she is drawing between these two cities? What are the dangers she is warning of?

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17. How does the portrait of the city in the book differ from or relate to the ideas of Jerusalem that you had before reading the book? How does it relate to the image of the city that one finds in newspapers? Were there things about Hoffman's characterization of the city that surprised you?
18. The book focuses on three architects, not one or two. Why do you think this number is important in relation to Jerusalem? Would the book have had a different effect if just two architects were featured? How would this alter the vision of the city that emerges from the book?

PRAISE FOR *TILL WE HAVE BUILT JERUSALEM*

"[A] scintillating study . . . Hoffman profiles three architects working in Palestine under British rule from 1918 to 1948 . . . The result is both vivid architectural criticism and an illuminating meditation on why Jerusalem's divisions now seem intractable." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"[A] brave and often beautiful book . . . [Hoffman's] subjects may be three now largely obscure builders—a German Jew, an Englishman, and an Arab—but *Till We Have Built Jerusalem* is very much a book about the present . . . [Hoffman] writes with a quiet, stubborn courage." —Ben Ehrenreich, *Los Angeles Times*

"Lovely . . . A composite of biography, architectural and political history, and reportage, Hoffman's engaging book illustrates the intricate interplay between architecture, identity, and history in this ancient and troubled city." —Nick Romeo, *The Christian Science Monitor*

"A beautifully written and captivating history . . . *Till We Have Built Jerusalem* is a passionate, lyrical defense of a Jerusalem that could still be, and a prophecy of the grim future that awaits the city if it continues on its current path. Our leaders would do well to heed [Hoffman's] warning." —Samuel Thrope, *Haaretz*

"In *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*, Adina Hoffman goes beyond writing history and biography to bring these [architects], their dreams and their work vividly and poignantly to life . . . She digs deep, but also casts her net outward to pull in dozens of fascinating supporting characters." —Elin Schoen Brockman, *Hadassah Magazine*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adina Hoffman is the author of *House of Windows: Portraits from a Jerusalem Neighborhood* and *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness: A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century*, named one of the Best Books of 2009 by the *Barnes & Noble Review*. She is also the author, with Peter Cole, of *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*, which received the American Library Association's award for the Jewish book of the year. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, she was awarded one of the inaugural Windham-Campbell Prizes in 2013. She divides her time between Jerusalem and New Haven. For more information, visit www.ibiseditions.com/adinahoffman.