

50 Wonders | Hana Loftus: Temple Mount, Jerusalem

15 February 2022

The Hat Projects co-founder recalls her surprise at experiencing how a place she knew well from books was inhabited in real life



Wonder: Temple Mount / Haram Al-Sharif, Jerusalem

Nominator: Hana Loftus

ADVERTISEMENT

As an undergraduate, I was eligible for travel grants (those were the days!) and thought that combining my desire to travel to the Middle East with the excuse of developing my academic thesis would be the perfect way to spend the college's money and the summer between my second and third years. Wendy Pullan, my supervisor for architectural history and theory, suggested exploring the Old City of Jerusalem.

The Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif, was an eye-opener. I had studied drawings and books before I went, and was thoroughly familiar with the archaeology and history, but I was unprepared how it was used by the residents of the city.



Hana Loftus

I had expected hushed respect and religious ritual but what I found was families picnicking – brewing tea and grilling kebabs on small braziers – football games, old men napping and women gossiping on rugs under the shade of trees or sitting on plastic chairs under a portico, school classes being taught, couples strolling arm in arm. I realised that the enormous platform was like a city park, yet so much more than most Western parks: a place for all community life to happen, both apart from the hectic bustle of the city and intrinsically bound to it.

When I later visited mosques in other countries, I realised that the purpose of the mosque courtyard as a place for everyday life is deeply rooted. The very simplicity of the plaza made it a place of infinite opportunities – no need for complex, prescriptive designs – just paving, trees, water, walls, some small fragments – arches and pillars and small domed pavilions – dotted around with little rhyme or reason.

The Haram al-Sharif became my peaceful place to relax and recharge during my research. A few days after I left Jerusalem, the second intifada broke out, and I haven't been there since. I keep in my mind's eye the plaza as I remember it – with the sound of kids playing football.

Postscript

Building Design's 50 Wonders is a series marking the magazine's 50th birthday. To share your favourites or to join the debate use the hashtag #BD50Wonders. To enjoy the full 50 [subscribe to Building Design now](#)