



City profile

City profile: Beersheba

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ABSTRACT

The modern age introduced rational, semi-scientific planning as a novel approach to the construction of new cities. Modern Beersheba, a desert city in the south of Israel, is an example of such an approach. The city was founded based on an administrative decision and for many decades it was molded and developed in a 'top-down' manner in line with a modernist planning model. Urban growth was based on plans for immigration and governmental investments, creating a sprawling 'city-less city' that local leadership is now struggling to revitalize. This paper reviews the major planning phases of the city, emphasizing the initial signs of changing development patterns, and the heavy burdens that the city has yet to overcome.

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1. Introduction

The city of Beersheba, once a small administrative center for the dispersed Bedouin population of the Negev desert, is now the second largest municipal area in Israel and the fourth metropolis after Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. Early twentieth-century images of open markets filled with live-stock, arenas for camel racing and gatherings of Bedouin sheikhs have long ago given way to those of modern neighborhoods, high-rises, shopping malls and wide roads. Beersheba today is a large spread-out desert city, home to 200,000 residents from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Jews who immigrated from the Middle-East, North Africa, Europe and Ethiopia, as well as a regional center of the rapidly growing Bedouin population.

From its very beginning as a modern city, Beersheba has been planned, governed and built 'top down' by various rulers: first by the Ottomans, followed by the British and then by the Israeli State. The strategic location at the gateway to the Negev desert played an important role in the decision to construct and develop it as an economic, political and cultural center. The political instability and importance of this location, combined with its relative remoteness from the geographic and civic center of the country, necessitated high reliance on government support. On the one hand, this support provided essential resources for development, establishing key institutions, building housing, and creating opportunities for employment. On the other hand, the State imposed highly ambitious plans that disregarded the social and physical climate of the city.

The dual aspect of the city has continued until today. The city has an important role as a regional administrative center. However, in other respects Beersheba has struggled to live up to the expectations. Beersheba's considerable physical growth in area (Fig. 1) has not been matched by a proportional increase in population, and it has consistently ranked low in socio-economic terms.¹ From an urban planning perspective, the city is characterized by low density, large and neglected open spaces, lack of lively streets, and considerable urban sprawl (Fig. 2). These poor conditions are, in part, the result of central governments continuously implementing modernist planning models, such as the 'garden city', without thoroughly examining their adaptability to the local context. While this was also the case for other cities in Israel and abroad, the combined circumstances of Beersheba as a desert city, located in the Israeli periphery far from the economic hub of the country, posed unique challenges to the success of these models.

In the last two decades, the city of Beersheba has experienced rapid changes in its governmental and economic base. Since the mid-1990s, the national government has withdrawn from many of its previous responsibilities and adopted neo-liberal policies, leaving leaders of the various Israeli cities to seek competitiveness by strengthening their local economic and cultural appeal. The legacy of nationally-driven development of earlier decades is being replaced by municipal initiatives driven by strong local leaders. In Beersheba, city leadership is revising development plans, construction is booming, and the high-tech industry is gaining momentum. In addition, external opportunities, some nationally-driven, such as large-scale relocation of army bases to the Negev area, serve as a potential catalyst to Beersheba's rise. These

¹ Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics publishes an annual index (1–10, with 1 being the lower rank) of municipalities according to a combination of social and economic parameters. In 2014, Beersheba was ranked 5. By comparison, Tel-Aviv was ranked 8.

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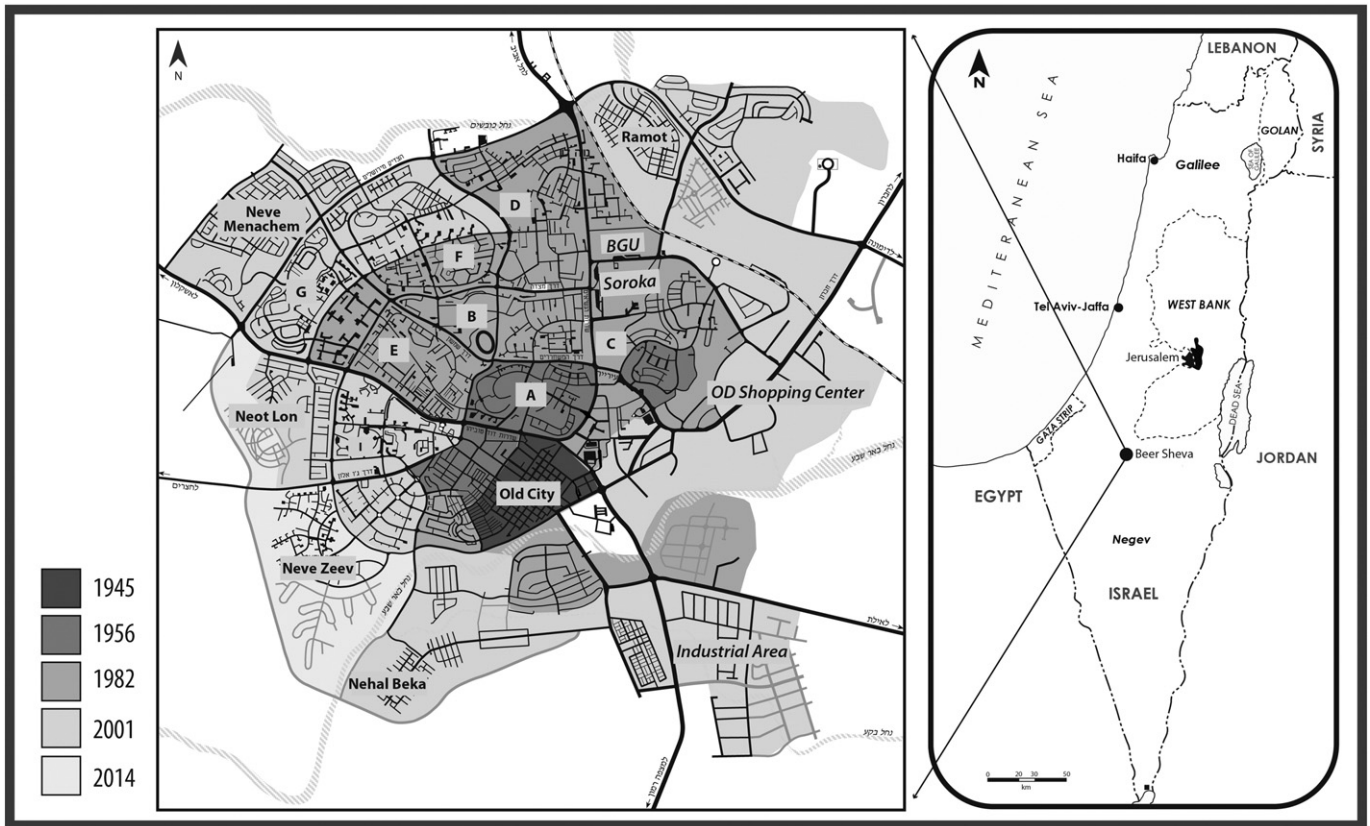


Fig. 1. A map of Beersheba (in relation to Israel) and its spatial development.

initiatives could transform the largely failed modernist legacy; they offer a promise of economic, social and environmental vibrancy and a source of local pride. However, the process is incomplete, and at times ambiguous, and it is not yet clear whether recent initiatives will overcome the deep faults of the past.

This article reviews the major phases of urban planning in Beersheba to highlight the dynamics of national and local initiatives, and their significance to spatial, social, economic and demographic characteristics of the city. Key challenges and future opportunities are explored.



Fig. 2. An aerial photo of Beersheba's inner neighborhoods composed of low-density buildings, with the newer neighborhoods at the outskirts. Source: with permission from Lowshot.co.il.

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