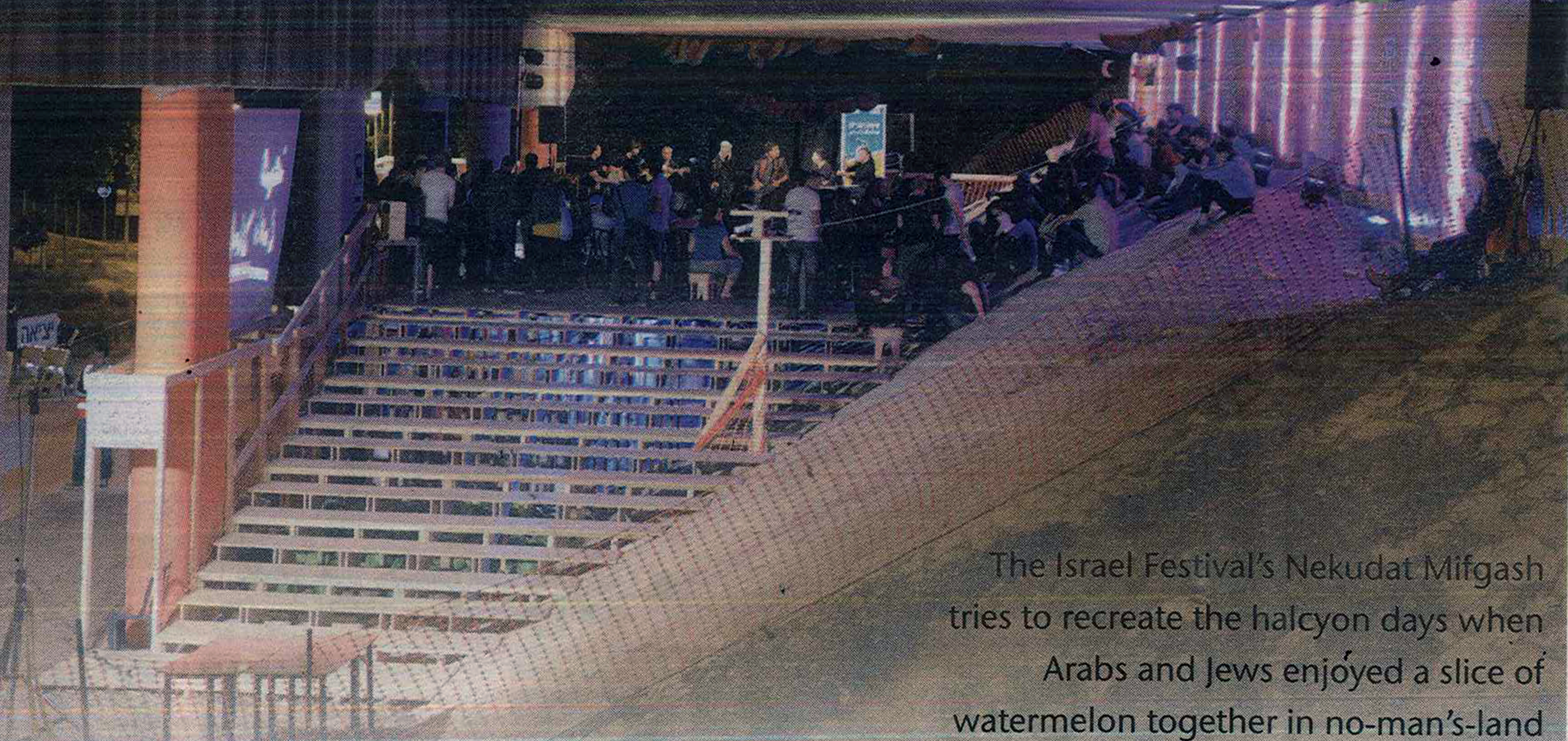


# Bridging the gaps



The Israel Festival's Nekudat Mifgash tries to recreate the halcyon days when Arabs and Jews enjoyed a slice of watermelon together in no-man's-land



• By BARRY DAVIS

Forty-odd years ago there was a thriving, bustling and, one might even say, joyful interface neighborhood in Jerusalem where Jews and Arabs often met and mingled over coffee and watermelon.

The area of Musrara is conveniently located near the Old City, and was a natural meeting point for residents of east and west Jerusalem. It may be a bit hard to imagine now, but the watermelon stalls of the late 1960s and early '70s were a place where Arabs and Jews could simply enjoy a slice or two of succulent, sugary fruit.

Although located at the opposite end of town, the Nekudat Mifgash (Meeting Point) program – which has been up and running since June 4 and will end tomorrow evening, as part of this year's Israel Festival – set out to recreate those halcyon days of watermelon-eating coexistence. The Nekudat Mifgash events have been taking place under a bridge along the Mesila Park route between the Katamonim and Beit Safafa, with a rich offering of activities and shows dished up daily.

The project is being overseen by the Muslala nonprofit collective of Jerusalem-based artists and social activists, which runs a wide range of public-domain events that feature artistic endeavor together with social import. The Muslala group is based on the belief that Jews and Arabs share more common ground than there are differences between the communities, and that everyone enjoys the simple things in life – such as digging your teeth into a slice of juicy melon.

The germ of the idea was set in place last winter when 40-year-old Berlin-based architecture lecturer Christophe Barlieb was asked by Israeli friend Matan Yisraeli, who serves as the Nekudat Mifgash



Berlin-based architecture lecturer Christophe Barlieb brought some of his students to Israel to help build Nekudat Mifgash's temporary structure. (Barry Davis)

All event at the structure built for Nekudat Mifgash.  
(Yotam Dvir)

artistic director, to come over to Jerusalem to see if the two of them could turn the confluence concept into a corporeal reality. "The whole idea is a sort of throwback to the days when there were watermelon *bastot* [stalls] in no-man's-land – Musrara, near Damascus Gate," explains Yisraeli.

It was clear from the outset that there would be some complex constructional challenges involved, so Yisraeli quickly got Barlieb on board. The German, who has American-French roots, soon saw the educational advantages of the venture.

"It was clear the project would take a lot of time, and I didn't want to do it in my studio as an architect, so I brought it into the university and gave it to my students." The institution in question is the Technical University of Berlin.

When I met Barlieb, the countdown to the opening-night program was approaching fast – and he, his 10 students and the Israeli helpers were feverishly drilling, installing screws and securing parapets. Looking around the temporary structure, which is due to be dismantled at the end of the summer, it was hard not to be impressed with the way Barlieb, Yisraeli et al. had gone about their business.

"We got all kinds of German companies to sponsor us," details Barlieb. "It was hard to begin with, but we got all the tools and raw materials from different companies, and all the quantities were precisely calculated. Nothing has been wasted, and the only thing that had to be added which wasn't in the original plan was the sheeting for the toilets; that was a last-minute addition." Ecology is an important component of the project, so waste was kept to a minimum.

As we talked, cyclists and joggers using the Mesila Park route, and local residents – Jewish and Arab alike – passed through or dropped by. The project had



clearly caused quite a buzz, and the first evening's entertainment slot, which featured Jerusalemite singer, multi-instrumentalist and painter Neta Elkayam, was a roaring success.

Barlieb is no stranger to this part of the world, having spent a year teaching at Shenkar College of Engineering and Design in Ramat Gan. As such, he is sensitive to certain aspects of the demographics in this part of the world, and saw the bridge site as being the perfect definitive meeting point. "From here you can see Beit Safafa in one direction, and if you look the other way, there's the Katamonim. And you get good light and air here."

But the venture has been anything but plain sailing. Although the project is taking place under the aegis of the Israel Festival, much of the funding came from German commercial companies, from which Barlieb managed to procure raw materials. He also says he was disappointed that his request for local residents' helping hands largely fell on deaf ears. "They all said they were busy, but now that they can see the project is taking place they are all very excited about it."

And well they might be. The construction Barlieb, his students and members of the Muslala gang put together looks wonderful. The entertainment talks place on the upper level, with the watermelon stored and sold below. The acoustics under the bridge are pretty good, too, as evidenced by the constant whir of drills and electric screwdrivers that went on while Christophe and I chatted.

Over the last week the temporary entertainment venue has played host to all kinds of acts, including a jam session with the Wat El Tarik Israeli-Palestinian ensemble, an evening of Arab-Jewish song and a children's clown act. Today's lineup



The Gil Ron Shama Ensemble at Nekudat Mifgash. (Yotam Dvir)

includes a noontime guided tour of the Katamonim neighborhood by Shlomo Vazana, a movement and improvisation workshop (3 p.m.), and a 4 p.m. Kabbalat Shabbat jam session.

"The Story of Beit Safafa" walking tour, led by local educator Tawfiq Othman, takes place at 5 p.m.

tomorrow, and veteran Algerian music performer and oud player Nino Biton and the Maghreb Orchestra will be the main attraction at tomorrow evening's (9 p.m.) closing event. •

*For more information: [Israel-festival.org.il](http://Israel-festival.org.il)*