

## **Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel**

Erik Anderson

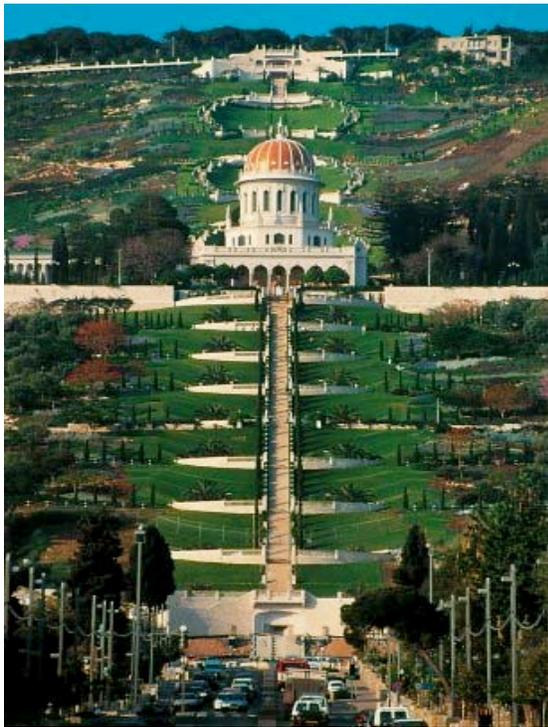
Architectural Preservation Services / Worcester Eisenbrandt, Inc.

2100 Gable Avenue

Baltimore, Maryland USA 21230

eanderson@aps-wei.com.

**Abstract:** The Shrine of the Báb is the permanent resting place of the Herald Prophet of the Bahá'í Faith and the spiritual center of the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel. The architectural intent of the superstructure shell (1953) over the original mausoleum (1908) and the extensive terraced landscaping (2001) above and below the structure, was to embrace the visitor in a rich sensory experience that effectively expresses the spiritual significance of the place and also safeguards the site.



*Figure 1.* The Shrine of the Báb and terraced gardens

With the extensive landscaping begun in 1987, this portion of the master plan for this central Shrine in the Bahá'í Faith was completed in 2001 and the site received the designation of UNESCO World Heritage status in 2008. The design intent of the landscaping was to create a beautiful and unique series of gardens that is conducive to prayer, mindfulness, and meditation. Now the combination of the architecture of the Shrine and completed terraced gardens embrace the visitor in a rich sensory experience that expresses the spiritual significance of the place. The close attention to detail in the landscape design engages the visitor's senses while tapestries of color, fragrance, bird songs, the gurgle of water, hundreds of steps and the feel of crushed tile underfoot serve to slow time. This heightening of senses and slowing of time with progressive pathways creates the meditative atmosphere conducive to spiritual awareness.

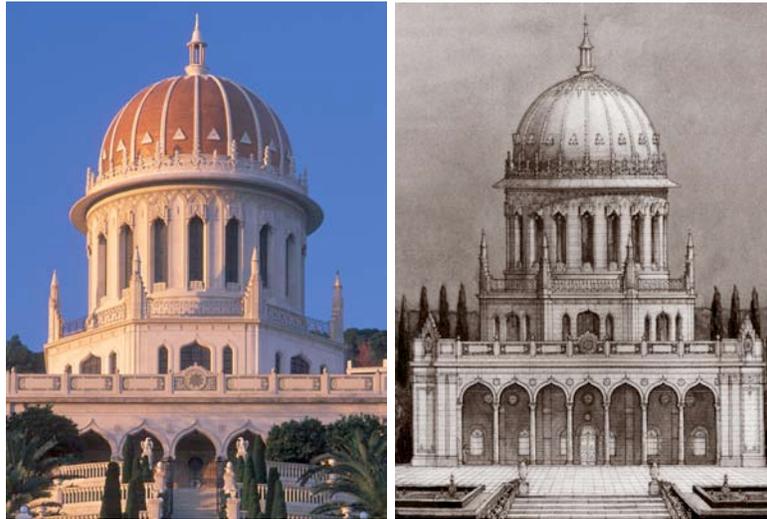
### **The Shrine of the Báb**

The Shrine is the resting place of Báb, who is one of the twin founders and Herald-Prophet of the Bahá'í Faith. Its location was determined in 1890 by the faith's primary founder, Bahá'u'lláh. The simple ashlar masonry mausoleum was built between 1900 and 1909 and included a cistern to collect water for future landscaping at this semi-arid site. The superstructure built over the mausoleum in 1953 was designed by Canadian architect William Maxwell in collaboration with the international head of the Bahá'í Faith at that time, Shoghi Effendi. The design is a successful blend of architectural styles from East and West. The dome as a symbol of unity has been used by churches, mosques, synagogues, temples for millennia. The stained glass in the drum is a reference to cathedrals and each window represents one of the first eighteen disciples to discover and believe in the Báb. The eight minarets at the top of the octagon reference the minarets of mosques. The ogee windows in the octagon reference Eastern style arches. The colonnade with granite columns and Corinthian capitals honor ancient Roman and Greek classical architecture. The red blossoms and green mosaic in the colonnade parapet panels represent the Báb's martyrdom and lineage as a descendent of Muhammad the prophet and founder of Islam. (Giachery, 1973) The gold-domed superstructure attracts visitors, inspires respect for the Bahá'í Faith's principles and protect the site from unsympathetic development (at the time of construction there were still many factions in Israel that were antagonistic to the Faith).

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through  
Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa,  
Israel

ICOMOS



*Figures 2&3.* The superstructure of the Shrine of the Báb as built and William Maxwell's pre-construction concept sketch



*Figure 4.* Detail carving on colonnade parapet of Shrine of the Báb with green and red mosaic behind the floral carving in Chiampo limestone

### **History of the Gardens and Terraces**

Gardens historically have been places of paradise, pleasing to the soul and senses, putting the mind at rest or to delight. The landscaping was always a part of the Shrine's master plan. In 1909 soon after construction, the first gardens were planted around the mausoleum. Between 1922 and 1957 as much land as possible was purchased around the Shrine in order to expand and protect the property for future development. Several formal gardens with a blend of Eastern and Western styles were designed and installed around the

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel

ICOMOS

site including nine small terraced gardens between the Shrine and the mountain base terminating at Ben Gurion Avenue at the foot of Mt. Carmel. The gardens were some of the first formal landscaping in northern Palestine.



*Figure 5.* The upper terraces of the Shrine of the Báb

### **Design Elements of Gardens and Terraces**

In 1987 the Canadian architect-engineer Fariborz Sahba was commissioned to design and construct 18 terraced gardens above and below the Shrine. The mountainous, seaside setting and unique architecture of the Shrine provided unique design challenges. A series of terrace gardens was a simple and elegant solution to the challenging slope of the mountain. A central design feature is a series of nine symmetric circles emanating above and below the Shrine along an axis directed across the bay of Haifa toward the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, the primary founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The City of Haifa moved Ben Gurion Street, at the base of the mountain, several meters to extend the axis along the three kilometer corridor between the top of Mount Carmel to the Mediterranean Sea (Haifa Municipality, 2001).

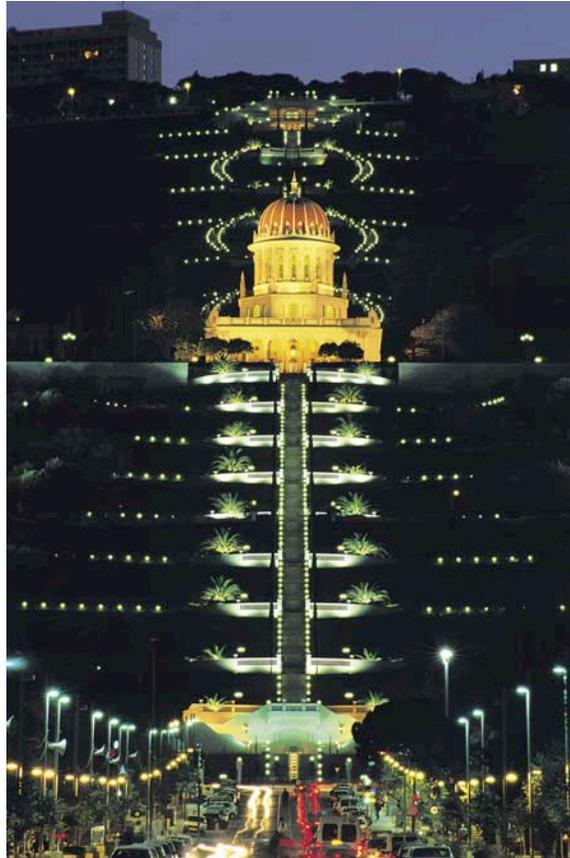
LIGHT

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through  
Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa,  
Israel

ICOMOS

During the Báb's imprisonment by the Persian government in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, he was denied even a candle to write by at night, so his mausoleum is awash in electric light at night. The light reflecting off of the different green colors in the garden plantings, turf and trees emphasize the nine circles above and below the Shrine. The dark green cypress trees interspersed with lamp posts highlight the circular terraces.



*Figures 6.* The upper and lower terraces and the Shrine of the Báb during the day and night

## WATER

Water follows the visitor along rills bordering each terrace and at lively fountains, which provide sound and movement that delight the senses. The water also attracts birds, whose songs camouflage the city sounds and help distract the visitor's mind from the mundane. The state-of-the-art pools cycle

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel

ICOMOS

water at each terrace and only lose water to evaporation. The efficient irrigation system provides more water to less drought-resistant plants at the central axis. More drought-resistant groundcover is used between the central axis and the wildlife corridor at each perimeter. The wildlife corridor forest does not require irrigation at all. Birds attracted by the water also provide natural pest control.



*Figures 7&8.* Fountains at lower terraces and detail of upper terrace fountain

#### COLOR

Each color is carefully selected, nothing being left to chance. For example, there are contrasting greens in the turf, plantings and trees. The silvery green of the olive leaves contrasts with the dark cypress. Some colors are symbolic, such as the red of the geraniums referencing the martyrdom of the Báb and the extensive use of green, the color used in Islam to depict direct lineage from the prophet Muhammad and worn frequently by the Báb during his lifetime. The whole side of the mountain is adorned in a robe of green.



*Figures 9&10.* Colorful bloom and sharp geometric pattern in shrubs and contrasting greens along the lower terraces.

#### HARDSCAPE – STONE, ORNAMENTS AND PATHS

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through  
Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa,  
Israel

ICOMOS

The masonry walls and stairs are of a local stone from the Galilee region and a similar beige color to the superstructure of the Shrine of the Báb itself. The treads on stairs and landings are darker than the vertical facing stone and therefore reduces the reflectivity of the surface for visitor comfort. The local stone is similar to other structures in Haifa, thereby honoring and creating a connection to the historic architectural fabric in the city. The stone carved elements also reference the architectural details on the Shrine. For example, the balusters outline the lancet windows in the drum of the superstructure. The gate posts have multi-faceted corners similar to those on the Shrine. At each landing there is a place for visitors to rest before climbing up or down, also to meditate or to observe the gardens and surrounding sea, sky and mountain.

The ornament along the terraces has no religious symbolism. The gates, railings and urns are a blend of East and West architectural styles that are designed simply to please the eye.

The paths leading from the stone steps and landings are of crushed red tile, which provides color, sound, and texture and forces the visitor to slow down. These paths also serve to distract visitors from mundane worries of the day and focus their attention on the beauty of the surroundings.



*Figures 10&11.* Stone path and crushed tile at lower terrace; seating bench for visitor comfort and meditation.

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through  
Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa,  
Israel

ICOMOS



*Figures 12&13.* Iron gates and stone balustrade at upper terraces; bronze eagle ornament

### **Importance to Tourism**

Formal gardens historically have been private places of wealthy individuals, families or royalty. In contrast, the terraced gardens of the Shrine of the Báb are open to the public and at no charge. The gardens have become very popular with tourists to northern Israel and the site's prominence is evident in print and electronic travel literature. One recent visitor described the gardens as "the most attractive uplifting place I've ever been" and further stated; "When you are surrounded by these gorgeous gardens and beautiful architecture, you can leave behind the outside world and focus on the real, spiritual self. The gardens are a testimony that the positive, constructive side of man can triumph over his less encouraging attributes." (Gordon RD, 2008)

The Municipality of Haifa has taken advantage of the unique site and plans to make the terraced gardens and Ben Gurion Avenue the doorway to the city from the Mediterranean Sea. The City started this plan when it straightened Ben Gurion Avenue to conform along the axis of the Shrine gardens. They also restored several of the former German Templar colony homes along the avenue at the base of Mount Carmel to provide a tourist district and a befitting avenue to frame the terraces between the sea and the base of the mountain. The Templars were German Christians who came to Palestine in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century to create a society worthy to welcome the return of Christ whom they expected to return to Palestine in 1844. They brought with them many professional skills and practices that improved the local agriculture, business, medicine, finance, public health, standard of living and architecture. Haifa evolved into a modern port and center of culture and standard for religious cooperation in Palestine and then Israel as a Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel

ICOMOS

result of their communities. Their characteristic white washed masonry and red clay roof tiled houses are now a tourist corridor with several shops and restaurants.



*Figure 14.* The Shrine of the Báb and a view of Haifa below

## **Conclusion**

Formal gardens have been a symbol of perfection and beauty for millennia and the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb continue this tradition. The nineteen terraces appear to emanate above and below the Shrine and the entire garden is centered on an axis from the top of the mountain to the sea pointing toward the direction of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, the primary of the twin founders of the Bahá'í Faith. The Terraced gardens of the Shrine of the Báb have become a destination for people of all faiths, and draw hundreds of thousands of visitors annually to the city of Haifa.

## **Acknowledgments**

Much gratitude for editing by Susan Harris of [www.gardenrant.com](http://www.gardenrant.com) and Judy Jacob of the National Park Service

## **References**

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel

ICOMOS

Giachery, Ugo. *Shoghi Effendi*. 1973. Oxford, U.K. George Ronald.  
Gordon, RD. *Trip Advisor Traveler Reviews*. 2008.  
([http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293982-d319539-r17601607-Bahai\\_Gardens\\_and\\_Golden\\_Dome-Haifa.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293982-d319539-r17601607-Bahai_Gardens_and_Golden_Dome-Haifa.html))  
Haifa Tourist Board. *Bahá'í Shrine and Gardens on Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel*. 2001.  
Haifa, Israel, Haifa Municipality.

#### IMAGES

All images except figures 5 & 14 are available from: Bahá'í International Community,  
(<http://media.bahai.org>)

Figures 5&14 Albatross Aerial Photography, Ltd.

Figures 1, 6-8, 12-13 Ruhi Vargha

Erik Anderson

Successfully Transmitting the Spirituality of a Holy Place Through  
Landscape Design: The Terraced Gardens of the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa,  
Israel

ICOMOS