

The Shrine of the Bab - Haifa, Israel

During a visit to Haifa in the summer of 1891,¹ Baha'u'llah stood by a circle of cypress trees halfway up the barren north slope of Mount Carmel and pointed out to Abdu'l-Baha a spot on the axis of the main avenue of the German Templar Colony where a fitting mausoleum should be erected to receive the remains of His forerunner, the Bab.² The circle of trees has been preserved and stands just behind the Shrine of the Bab.

Having brought the remains of the Bab to the Holy Land at the end of 1899, 'Abdu'l-Baha' set about the arduous task of purchasing the land and erecting a stone building of six rooms for His mausoleum at the exact location selected by Baha'u'llah. "Every stone of that building, every stone of the road leading to it, I have with infinite tears and at tremendous cost, raised and placed in position," Abdu'l-Baha is recorded as having remarked repeatedly.³ In preparation for the re-interment of these sacred remains, the Baha'is of Burma sent a marble sarcophagus with inscriptions in the hand of the well-known Baha'i calligrapher, Mishkin-Qalam. It arrived in Haifa by sea and was dragged from the pier up the slope of the mountain with the help of wooden rollers.⁴ In an emotional ceremony, witnessed and described by Shoghi Effendi, the Bab's remains were finally laid to rest:



Shrine of the Bab

On...the first Naw-Ruz which He celebrated after His release from His confinement [21 March 1909], Abdu'l-Baha had the marble sarcophagus transported with great labor to the vault prepared for it, and in the evening, by the light of a single lamp, He laid within it, with His own hands – in the presence of believers from the East and from the West and in circumstances at once solemn and moving – the wooden casket containing the sacred remains of the Bab and His companion. When all was finished, and the earthly remains of the Martyr-Prophet of Shiraz were, at long last, safely deposited for their everlasting rest in the bosom of God's holy mountain, Abdu'l-Baha, Who had cast aside His turban, removed His shoes and thrown off His cloak, bent low over the still open sarcophagus, His silver hair waving about His head and His face transfigured and luminous, rested His forehead on the border of the wooden casket, and, sobbing aloud, wept with such a weeping that all those who were present wept with Him. That night He could not sleep, so overwhelmed was He with emotion.⁵

Twelve years later, in November 1921, Abdu'l-Baha was himself to be laid to rest under the floor of one of the three northern rooms of that building, which was to be completed and embellished by Shoghi Effendi.



Shrine of the Bab - view from bottom terrace

Not long after Shoghi Effendi became head of the community, he personally supervised the addition of three rooms to the building erected by Abdu'l-Baha, converting it into a symmetrical square with nine rooms. In these added rooms, Shoghi Effendi established the first international archives to store the original manuscripts, relics, personal objects, photographs and portraits associated with the Bab, Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha.⁶

In the early 1940s, Shoghi Effendi asked his father-in-law, the distinguished Canadian architect, William Sutherland Maxwell, to design a befitting superstructure for the Shrine of the Bab.

A model reflecting his design, which consists of a colonnade surmounted by a drum, a clerestory and a dome, was unveiled in May 1944, on the centenary of the Bab's declaration of His prophetic mission.⁷ Despite the after-effects of the Second World War and the turmoil sweeping the region, construction was completed in October 1953.

Rose Baveno granite columns crowned with marble Corinthian capitals form the colonnade surrounding the original stone building. The columns are linked by arabesque ogee arches, while the four corners feature concave panels decorated with a floral border capped with a calligraphic design. The clerestory rests on a marble octagon surmounted by a wrought-iron balustrade with a slender minaret-like spire at each corner. The eighteen stained-glass windows of the clerestory symbolize the Bab's first disciples. The dome is covered with gold-plated ceramic tiles and is topped by a small lantern and marble finial.⁸ The building's extraordinary location and harmonious blend of Eastern and Western styles have made it a familiar landmark and one of the most popular tourist sites in the country.

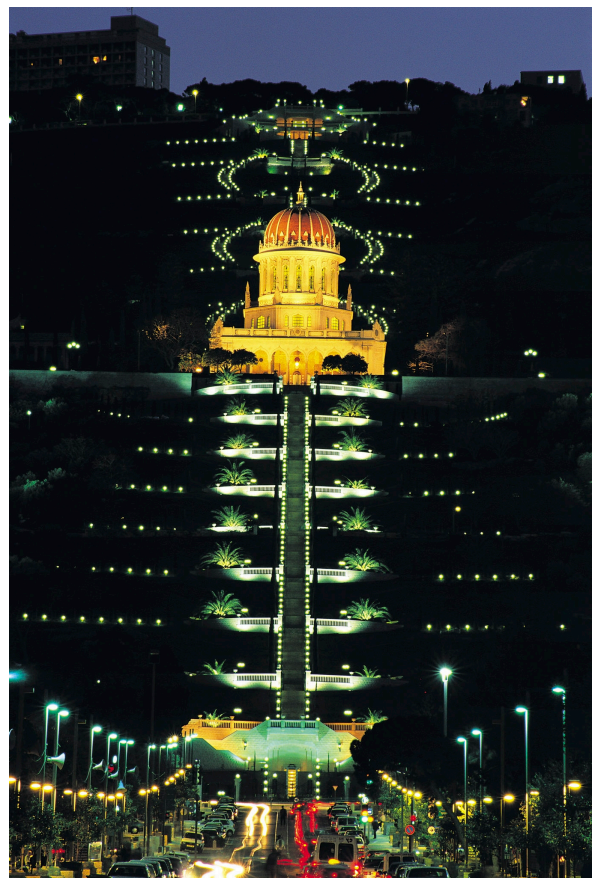
The Terraced Gardens

One of the believers noted down the gist of the words spoken by Abdu'l-Baha in 1910, when Mount Carmel was a barren wilderness of stone and brambles: "Ere long this mountain will become habitable. Many fine buildings will be built on it. The Shrine of the Bab will be constructed in the most exquisite fashion and will appear with the utmost beauty and magnificence. Terraces will be built from the bottom of the mountain to the top. Nine terraces from the bottom to the Shrine and nine terraces from the Shrine to the summit. Gardens with colorful flowers will be laid down on all these terraces. A single street lined with flower beds will link the seafront to the Shrine."⁹

The gardens created by Shoghi Effendi around the Shrine of the Bab pioneered the style he would later use in Bahji, and they have served as a model for all subsequent landscape developments. Design elements include crushed red tile pathways bordered by clipped hedges of varying heights and star-shaped floral plantings, while the main approach to the Shrine is set off with smooth white pebbles. Garden ornaments including urns and statues of eagles, peacocks and flowers on pedestals complete the design.

Anticipating the future construction of the terraces above and below the Shrine, Shoghi Effendi also built a narrow central stairway from the German Colony at the foot of the mountain to the Shrine, including a pedestrian bridge over Abbas Street (named after Abdu'l-Baha), which bisects the property.¹⁰

The concept articulated by Abdu'l-Baha was the foundation for the design prepared by Fariborz Sahba, a Persian-born Canadian architect, for a unique monument of landscape architecture to serve as a setting for and approach to the mausoleum containing the remains of the Bab. The number of the terraces brings to mind the Bab's first group of eighteen disciples, whom He called the "Letters of the Living", and their geometry surrounds and embraces the central edifice of the Shrine in a way that suggests multiple concentric circles emanating from it like ripples in a pond.



Shrine of the Bab and terraced gardens - night view

The central path of the terraces is set about with formal gardens and ornaments, while fountains and channels of running water provide a visual and auditory complement, creating a serene and reflective atmosphere. Aside from certain common elements, each terrace is unique in its paving, ornamentation and plantings, reflecting the essential Baha'i belief in unity in diversity. Light is another integral feature of the design, and the Shrine and terraces are brightly lit each night to commemorate the time when the Bab was imprisoned and denied access to even a candle.¹¹

Construction of the terraces began in 1990, and they were inaugurated in May 2001. Approximately one million visitors were drawn to the terraced gardens in the year following their opening to the public. According to the Mayor of Haifa at that time: "The gorgeous gardens, the cool and crystal clear fountains, the delicately curved balustrades, and the perfume of the spectacular flowers intoxicate the visitor. The chiseled and sculptured work coordinates with the colorful plants, creating beauty, harmony and tranquility."¹²

The international governing body of the Baha'i community has stated that: "The beauty and magnificence of the Gardens and Terraces...are symbolic of the transformation which is destined to occur both within the hearts of the world's people and in the physical environment of the planet."¹³

¹ Although still subject to the Sultan's firman and therefore nominally a prisoner, Baha'u'llah was able to move around freely in the latter years of His life, visiting Haifa and Mount Carmel, among other places. In addition to His brief stop in the port of Haifa on His initial journey to Acre, Baha'u'llah is known to have visited the town on three other occasions: August 1883, April 1890, and finally in the summer of 1891 for about three months. Ruhe, *Door of Hope*, pp.104-5; and Balyuzi, *Baha'u'llah, The King of Glory*, p. 407, which confirms Baha'u'llah's four visits to Haifa.

² Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, vol. 4, p. 359.

³ Ibid., p. 275.

⁴ Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, vol. 3, pp. 430-1.

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 276.

⁶ Giachery, *Shoghi Effendi*, pp. 61-2.

⁷ This model is now displayed in the hall of the Mansion of Bahj.

⁸ For details on the structure and components of the building, see Giachery, *Shoghi Effendi*, chapter vii.

⁹ Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, vol. 4, p. 170.

¹⁰ Ruhe, *Door of Hope*, p. 171.

¹¹ *Bahá'í Shrine and Gardens on Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel, A visual journey*. Edited and compiled by the Haifa Tourist Board ([Haifa]: Municipality of Haifa, Haifa Tourist Board and Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 2001), p. 34.

¹² *Baha'i Shrine and Gardens on Mount Carmel*, p. 9.

¹³ Baha'i World Centre, *Visiting Baha'i Holy Places*, p. 25.