Israel as a Modern Architectural Experimental Lab, 1948-1978

Edited by Inbal Ben-Asher Gitler and Anat Geva

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Contents

Introduction

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Historian Roger Adelson has argued, with regard to mid-twentieth-century western international politics, that a 'view of the Middle East gained currency that tended to simplify the region's diversity and complexity'.[1] As Adelson writes, this is a view that persists even today, at least in the media.[2] As architectural historians, we are given the task of unraveling and exposing a region's diversity and complexity, in retracing the physical space of nation building. In the Middle East, physical territories have been deconstructed and reassembled by conflict and war, migration and exile, nations and communities. The contours of this space delineate the similarities and the unique architectural production of each of its nations. By presenting new research on Israeli architecture, we hope to deepen not only our understanding of Israeli architectural culture, but also to contribute to the research on the region's architecture in general and its recent history.

Studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Middle Eastern architecture, which have proliferated during the past two decades, have already begun to reveal the intricate connections between architectural practices, as well as the diverse negotiation of tradition and innovation among different places in the Middle East, in its wider geographical definition.[3] Recent scholarship dealing with these shared architectural histories has challenged established dichotomies of modern versus traditional, East versus West, and centre versus periphery.[4] These alternative histories present analyses and discuss the architects who operated within expanding and rapidly transforming 'boundaries' of aesthetic and formal criteria. However, only a few scholars have discussed these issues in regards to Israel.

The compilation presented in this volume seeks to add significant insights to our reassessment of these concepts and to the understanding of Israeli architecture as an experimental laboratory of modern architecture. The essays included in this book discuss the architecture of Israel during its first three decades following the state's establishment in 1948.

The idea of a modern Jewish state in the Land of Israel was already envisioned by Theodor Herzl's Zionist utopia at the end of the nineteenth century. In his book, *Altneuland* ('Old New Land'), written in 1902, he describes an independent, secular, democratic Jewish state, which would follow modern Europe.[5] His Zionism is described by Steven Smith as 'a [technical] idealism of ends with a Machiavellianism of means'.[6] Herzl's contemporary, Achad Ha'am, envisioned a new Zionist-Jewish culture that would promote the core image of a new modern Jew based on western European culture.[7] It should be noted that this ideal did not account for Eastern European Jewish culture or the cultures of Jews from Muslim countries.

Indeed, Zionism, the secular ideology supporting and promoting the return of Jews to Palestine/Eretz Israel, hailed the western system of culture, economics, and politics as the model society upon which a future Jewish nation would be established. The Yishuv – the Zionist settlement of Palestine/Eretz Israel – developed according to this ideology from the middle of the nineteenth century until the end of the British Mandate in Palestine in 1948. It adopted European modernism as its technological, structural, and stylistic building approach.[8] This architecture, which provided the physical space of the sociopolitical structure of Jewish settlement in Palestine, became the basis and foundation for ensuing Israeli architecture. The Yishuv established distinct typologies for both urban and rural settlements, and by the end of British rule and Israel's establishment in 1948, these too were fully developed.

The year 1948 – when Israel was established as an independent nation-state – is the departure point for this book. Its timeframe terminates in 1978. The state's establishment affected new developments in urban and rural planning, as well as in architecture, and reflected social and political transformations. The year 1978 was a turning point, and generally marks two significant events: (1) the rise of the Likud government (1977), which brought about significant political changes in policies and ideologies and signified profound social transformations in the country; and (2) the signing of peace accords with Egypt (1978), which was the culmination of major political developments throughout the region. As several chapters in the present volume demonstrate, these temporal boundaries allow for flexibility, and can be challenged from various critical positions.

In many ways, Israel's built environment was a continuation of pre-state architectural culture that served as a civic vehicle for building the nation-state. Still, architecture during its first three decades was innovative and experimental in character. It presented a reassessment of modernist architectural approaches emanating from Europe and to some extent from the United States, while expressing local sociopolitical ideologies and economic constraints. Three of these ideologies had a profound impact upon Israeli architecture. First, the perception of Israel as progressive, and as home to an advanced new Jewish society that is part of western culture. This was reflected in the adaptation of western architectural culture, along with its technologies. Second, the use of architecture as a means to express the idea of Israel as a 'melting pot' new society. The vast post-World War II Jewish immigration from all over the world was addressed by a national policy of establishing a new, unified, Jewish society. This ideology ignored immigrants' cultural collective memories and often disregarded the Israeli regional local environment.[9] Third, the establishment of Jewish settlements in all regions of the state, which intended to densify Jewish presence in unpopulated regions, as well as in places deserted by Palestinians, or from which they were expelled. This strategy of claiming land vis-à-vis Palestinian displacement was subject to diverse modes of patronage, as well as to ongoing introspection, disputes, and policy changes. Architecture was inherently impacted by all these ideologies and expressed its modernity as a vehicle to address political changes while trying to continue the civic ideal of uniformity.

Accordingly, and following this volume's essays, three periods that influenced architecture and planning can be outlined. First, the period of early development, between 1948 and

1956. At that time, Israel's national master plan was introduced, and the first developments of modular unified mass-housing and governmental public buildings took place.[10] Second, the period between 1957 and 1966. During this phase, a reassessment of the first plans and designs was conducted. The re-evaluation of those concepts, which turned out to be unsuitable for specific cultural and environmental conditions, pushed designers to adopt modernism's shift towards regionalism.[11] The third phase lasted from 1967 until 1978. The architecture of that period coincided with the state's political transformations following the 1967 War, as well as with the development of new regional and city master plans.[12] These affected local interpretations of evolving global trends in modern architecture, while earlier concepts of uniformity were reassessed and gradually abandoned.

In all three phases, national settlement policies significantly impacted architecture as well. Thus, architecture became a testing ground that reflected policies such as

- 'The conquest of the desert': a concept that dictated the appropriation of the Negev desert;
- The settlement of the Galilee – the northern mountainous part of Israel – which initiated the establishment of hilltop settlements;
- The launch of 'development towns' in the periphery;
- The continuation of the Zionist ideology of the kibbutz and the moshav – the collective rural settlements;
- The instigation of the 'communal settlement' in newly occupied territories, such as the West Bank and the Golan Heights, following the 1967 War.

In light of these events and national ideologies, this volume raises a set of interrelated questions with regard to Israeli architecture: what were the transformations that it underwent during the first three decades? In what way were the novel developments of late modernism, or the late International Style, expressed in Israel? What impact did the Israeli civic policy of uniformity have on the architectural experimentation in modernism? And finally, how was Israeli architecture exported and disseminated globally? These questions are addressed in the book within a broader inquiry into modernism and its relation to the nation-state in the context of cultural, social, economic, and technological issues.[13]

As with inquiries dealing with other Middle Eastern countries, postcolonial theory has proved instrumental in researching the architectural history of Israel.[14] However, Kathleen James-Chakraborty's 2014 call to historians of non-western architecture to move 'beyond postcolonialism' is also valid in this case.[15] New research 'answering' this call has begun investigating the role of collective memory and the architecture of commemoration,[16] and has explored issues of gender, as well as additional themes.[17] An investigation that has further broadened the postcolonial lens can be found in recent discussions dealing with architects' experimentation with the idea of 'placelessness' or internationality, and their attempt at reconciling these with the search for locality.[18] In the Israeli case, this process is especially potent and intriguing, as different interpretations of place and locality were recruited during the early years of establishment: did 'place' refer to a general notion of the Mediterranean

Basin? Was a broad Middle Eastern place elicited, or a local Palestinian one?[19] These issues require investigation, especially since the Mediterranean, which includes several countries in the Middle East, was not only impacted by modernism, but also had a central influence upon its evolvement as a novel architectural approach.[20]

By researching fascinating case studies that discuss a wide variety of typologies, the essays brought together in this volume shed new light on many of the questions posed here and on related phenomena. They are addressed in all four sections of the book, including a concluding chapter that illustrates the essays' analyses of the questions posed at the outset of this introduction, and presents the conclusions that can be derived from these new studies.

The book's first section, 'Modern Experiments in Rural and Urban Design', addresses mass-housing neighbourhoods in development towns and communal settlements in the occupied territories, and devotes a chapter to the kibbutz.

In the first chapter, Yair Barak investigates Artur Glikson's mass-housing neighbourhood in the development town of Kiryat-Gat, located in Israel's central-southern part. In his analysis, Barak scrutinizes the sociological research conducted prior to planning this neighbourhood. The neighbourhood's preparatory studies and its plan were intended to achieve successful implementation of the national ideology of social unification. Barak demonstrates how this project served as grounds for the emerging criticality of the idea of the melting pot, and analyses Glikson's innovative approach to private versus communal spaces on an urban scale.

In the second chapter, Oryan Shachar presents one neighbourhood in the northern development town of Hatzor HaGlilit, built for the ultraorthodox Gur Hasidic community in the early 1970s. Conceived by David Reznik more than a decade after Glikson's neighbourhood, the Gur neighbourhood was a segregated urban space for a community defined by its religiosity. In this, it exemplifies the profound transformation that national planning underwent within this period – from the policy of unification to one of a gradual acceptance of the diverse social groups and ethnicities that comprise the nation as a whole.

In the third chapter, Yael Allweil addresses the West Bank settlement initiatives following the 1967 War. As with the Hasidic community, these settlement projects were carried out by clearly defined sociopolitical entities: the Religious Kibbutz Movement and the settlement movement, Elon-More. Allweil analyses the emergence of the communal settlements of the West Bank as a typology grounded in earlier Zionist traditions. She interprets this typology as a merge of urban and rural settlement ideologies, demonstrating how Zionist settling practices were used to justify territorial claims and harness Israeli support of them. Allweil discusses this experiment as one that challenges the widely accepted periodization, which divides Israeli architectural historiography by the change of regime that took place in 1977. She argues that the continuation of this project well into the 1990s, as settlement initiatives 'enacted by citizens in manipulation of state mechanisms', exhibits continuity rather than rupture of the historical timeline.[21]

The last chapter in this section is by Elissa Rosenberg. She researches kibbutz landscape designs, as well as the writings on this subject by kibbutz architect Shmuel Bickels. Her chapter analyses how the kibbutz – the best-known experimental modern rural space

designed under the framework of Zionist ideologies – continued to evolve during the first decades of the nation. Rosenberg illuminates Bickels's emphasis on the relationship between the kibbutz garden and its surrounding landscape, an expression of locality that distinguished him from the mainstream of kibbutz planning and constituted a critique of the 'placelessness' of international modernism.

The book's second section, 'Public Architecture as a Testing Ground', includes four chapters dealing with public buildings: exhibition spaces, youth villages, and synagogues.

Eliyahu Keller investigates the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, designed by architects Alfred (Al) Mansfeld and Dora Gad. Keller compares this national monument with Aldo van Eyck's famous orphanage in the Netherlands. This comparison includes van Eyck's structuralist theory, which influenced the architects' approach to the museum's design. These concepts are used by Keller to explain the appropriation of locality through the abstraction of a typical hillside local Palestinian village. Such analysis provides an in-depth understanding of how late modernism was adapted and embedded in regional contexts.

In the second chapter of this section, Sigal Davidi examines architect Genia Averbuch's plans for youth villages intended for Jewish immigrants, built during the mass-immigration waves of early statehood. The villages' functions were geared towards immigrant children's modern secular education, with the intention of transforming them into 'modern Israelis' with a 'love for the homeland and its soil'.[22] In addition to the analysis of the villages' design, this chapter exemplifies the contribution of women architects to modern Israeli architecture.

The third chapter, by Naomi Simhony, addresses three synagogues designed by different architects. These houses of worship represented a redefinition of this typology by using late modernist formal vocabularies, with no relation to particular religious symbols. These synagogues derived their inspiration from contemporary civic and modern sacred architecture in the West, connecting it with local, as well as Mediterranean, traditions. Simhony demonstrates how the use of familiar sacred architectural elements and morphology were linked later in time to religious symbols and, in the case of architects Alfred Neumann and Zvi Hecker, elicited Muslim and Jewish geometric patterns, in an attempt to convey inter-religious and multicultural dialogue.

Jeremy Kargon discusses in the fourth chapter a design competition for the Center for Technological Awareness, called the 'Technodea'. Focusing on the winning entry by Hillel Schocken, Uri Shaviv, and Tsiyona Margalit-Gerstein, Kargon demonstrates how British architectural discourse, taking place during the same period, influenced Israeli architects. Kargon investigates the immediate and reflexive adaptation of this discourse to local climate, topography, materials, and even nascent sustainability. His research analyses isolate the functional and formal shift from late modernist approaches in the planning of exhibition spaces to postmodern concepts in architectural design. The Technodea scheme was among the first to introduce these design ideas into the local architectural scene.

The third section of this book, entitled 'Considering Climate', discusses the architectural experiments intended to adapt modernism to Israel's environmental conditions, including the country's desert regions.

The chapter by Daphne Binder and Theodore Kofman focuses on the Dead Sea region, the lowest place (below sea level) in the world, and its development in the face of extreme hot-arid environmental conditions. They analyze architecture's relation to topography to afford breezes and views; they reveal the importance of shading and density, achieved by covered streets, minimal, well-oriented fenestration, and internal courts. Binder and Kofman further demonstrate how the architecture for this region integrated modern technology with local materials. The use of concrete with extensive earthwork, as well as local stone and gravel, created a sense of locality and contemporaneity while providing thermal comfort.

Isaac Meir, Rachel Bernstein and Keren Shalev's chapter deals with three decades of climatic considerations in planning the desert town of Be'er Sheva. The chapter investigates mass-housing neighbourhoods, campuses, and additional civic projects using empirical measurements. It demonstrates that the desert was considered by architects only for its summer conditions (e.g., heat and glaring radiation), while the other side of the extreme – cold winters – were ignored.

The last chapter of this section by Or Aleksandrowicz traces the evolvement of science-based climatic planning and conducts a comparative analysis of two university buildings: one in the campus of Tel Aviv University, designed by Werner Joseph Wittkower and the other in Haifa University, designed by renowned Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, with Shlomo Gilad as the local architect. Aleksandrowicz demonstrates that despite the accumulated knowledge and guidelines for climatic planning, architects based their designs more on intuition than on facts.

The final section of the book, 'Reflections Abroad', discusses the exportation of Israeli architecture both conceptually and physically.

In the first chapter, Matteo Cassani Simonetti analyses Italian discourse on Israeli architecture as it evolved from Italian political post-war architectural culture, and as grounded in Italian Jewish architectural tradition, or lack thereof. Simonetti highlights the central role of Italian architectural critic and historian Bruno Zevi in this process. Zevi was one of the key figures affecting the relationship between Italian and Israeli architectural culture, viewing Israeli architectural experiments as viable models for Italy. By examining which Israeli projects received attention, Simonetti positions Israeli architecture within the wider modernist discourse in Italy. The prominence of Israeli architecture in Italian media exemplifies the European attention given to modernist ventures outside its borders, and beyond what was geographically considered as 'West'.

In the second chapter, Ayala Levin compares the Israeli parliament building in Jerusalem, the Knesset, with the Sierra Leone parliament. She analyses how architect Ram Karmi, who participated in the planning of the Knesset, designed the Sierra Leone parliament in light of lessons learned from the former project in Israel. She investigates his desire to imbue architectural modernism with monumentality, as well as his approach to creating a distinct national identity tailored to each locale. Here, too, the question of which traditions were appropriated, and how these were related to post-war modernism, surfaces as a major dilemma for architect Karmi. Levin engages this dilemma by probing the concept of

'nativeness' as expressed in both buildings, and as developed by Karmi in light of Team X and Brutalist ideas that he adopted from Europe. She demonstrates that while in Israel the connection to place and origin constituted an important aspect of the policy of cultural unification and sense of rootedness, in Sierra Leone similar aesthetic devices and local materials were harnessed to promote ethnic and religious coexistence.

As a whole, the book's chapters describe the challenges that architects in Israel faced and their achievements, while operating within the framework of building the nation-state and creating a discourse with their clients and the public. Finally, in this volume's conclusion, we demonstrate how each of the case studies provides fresh insights regarding the wide use of modernism and its negotiations and adaptation to Israel.

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21 See Yael Allweil's chapter in this book, 73.

22 See Sigal Davidi's chapter in this book, 156.