



Arieh Sharon, Ohel theatre, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1937-1939 © Azrieli Architectural Archive, The Arieh Sharon Collection, 1950s.

From “White City” to “Bauhaus City” — Tel Aviv’s urban and architectural resilience

BY MARINA EPSTEIN-PLIOUCHTCH AND TALIA ABRAMOVICH

In the early 1930s, Modernism became the normative style of architecture in Tel Aviv. This was due to the architects who operated in Tel Aviv, from all over Europe, including architects who studied at the Bauhaus. This essay will discuss how Modernist Tel Aviv evolved from the “White City” (UNESCO World Heritage Site) to the “Bauhaus City”, and how these myths, constantly being reinvented, have contributed to the city’s resilience, which has enabled urban and architectural conservation.

Introduction

Tel Aviv’s so-called White City, built in the 1930s, was declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 2003. It has since become recognized as a landmark of the Modern Movement, an early and singularly authentic example of an urban environment, a new town realized consistently in the Modernist idiom.¹ Established in 1909 as a suburb of Jaffa, within two decades, Tel Aviv — the “first Jewish city” — had a well-thought-out town plan and a coherent architectural character. By 1925, first, Richard Kauffmann (1887–1958), the German architect and town planner (in 1921), and then Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), the British modern town planner, had devised the city’s plan for the area between the older neighborhoods in the south up to the Yarkon River, further north. The site for conservation, considered the world’s largest concentration of early Modernist buildings, was planned by architects who had received most of their professional education in Europe.

Six architects who worked in Palestine in the 1930s had been students at the Bauhaus. Four left Palestine to study architecture in Germany; two others came to the Bauhaus from Poland. After their Bauhaus studies, they returned to Palestine, settling in Tel Aviv, Haifa, or in the rural settlements, just as rising waves of immigrants from Nazi Germany were giving new impetus to the country’s development and construction.

In this essay, we will examine one of the prevailing myths of Tel Aviv — the “Bauhaus City”. Generally speaking, architectural knowledge rarely crosses the boundaries of the profession and does not attain the level of a public asset, so we must ask how and why Tel Aviv achieved its “design” title. We will discuss the nature of the definition of Tel Aviv as the “Bauhaus City” and how “Tel Aviv Bauhaus” contributes to the city’s urban and architectural resilience. We will also examine the preservation challenges facing Modernist Tel Aviv in the second decade of the 21st century.

Transfer of modernity, ideas and people

The late 1920s saw economic slowdown and serious local crises in Palestine, and particularly Tel Aviv. Consequently, a handful of young people headed to Europe to pursue studies in the arts, architecture, graphics and more. Nineteen of them spent time at the Bauhaus before returning to Palestine,² among them six architects: Arieh Sharon (1900–1984), Chanan Frenkel (1905–1957), Shlomo Bernstein (1907–1969), Shmuel Mestechkin (1908–2004), Munio Gitai (Weinraub) (1909–1970), and Edgar Hed (Hecht) (1904–1956).

The most prominent of these were Arieh Sharon, Shmuel Mestechkin and Munio Gitai-Weinraub; the most influential was the first.³ Born in Poland in 1900, Arieh Sharon immigrated to Palestine in 1920 and settled in *kibbutz* Gan Shmuel. In 1926 he enrolled at the Bauhaus school under the direction of Walter Gropius (1883–1969). In 1928, he traveled with Hannes Meyer (1889–1954) to Moscow, where they presented the Bauhaus’s ideas. On completion of his studies in 1929, he worked in Meyer’s office in Berlin. Turning down an invitation to join a second delegation to Moscow in 1931, he chose to return to Palestine and establish his own office, where he eventually planned hundreds of public and residential buildings, from workers’ housing to a theater in Tel Aviv. In the 1940s he focused his planning on rural settlements, mainly the *kibbutz*. After the State was established, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion recruited Arieh Sharon to lead the drafting of the national plan (1951).⁴

Shmuel Shmuel Mestechkin immigrated from Ukraine to Palestine with his family in 1923 and settled in Tel Aviv. In 1931 he began studying at the Bauhaus in Dessau, under the direction of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969); his teachers included Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Josef Albers (1888–1976), and Ludwig Hilbersheimer (1885–1967). After his graduation in 1933, Shmuel Shmuel Mestechkin returned to Palestine, where he later founded his own firm.

From 1943 he was an architect and planner for the *kibbutz* movement, planning housing, dining halls, and other communal buildings. In the 1960s he designed two prominent public buildings in Tel Aviv, Brenner House and the Headquarters of the national *kibbutz* movement.

Polish-born Munio Gitai studied at the Bauhaus from 1927 to 1931, worked for Mies van der Rohe in Berlin, then moved to Haifa in 1934. In partnership with architect Al Mansfeld (1912–2004) from 1938 to 1958, he planned public and apartment buildings, public housing and factories in Haifa and its suburbs. Munio Gitai also taught at the Technion, IIT, in Haifa.

During this period, political events were determining peoples' fate. Hannes Meyer succeeded Walter Gropius as Bauhaus director in 1928; two years later he was fired and left for Moscow, where several Bauhaus students joined him. Mies van der Rohe ran the school from 1930. In 1933, the school in Berlin was closed. Its teachers dispersed to cities and architecture schools around the world. Walter Gropius went to Harvard, Hannes Meyer to Mexico, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to Chicago. Josef Albers emigrated to North Carolina, László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) to Chicago. These teachers and their students became “international agents” for Bauhaus ideas around the world.⁵ Few of them, however, landed in Palestine.

Arieh Sharon, Shmuel Mestechkin, and Munio Gitai were among the architects who adopted the Bauhaus concepts of social architecture. Emphasized mainly during the school's final decade, these ideas were contemporaneous with the development of the *kibbutz*, the Socialist communal settlement in Palestine. Although the city of Tel Aviv was planned primarily for bourgeois professionals, Arieh Sharon carried out residential projects for Tel Aviv workers, in the spirit of social architecture. Eight of these were constructed between 1931 and 1935, mostly in collaboration with other architects such as Joseph Neufeld (1898–1980), Karl Rubin (1899–1955), Israel Dicker, Dov Kucinski and Jonathan Schlaine. One cooperative housing complex for workers, which Arieh Sharon planned single-handedly, was called *Hod* — a Hebrew acronym connoting glory. Its uniformly-sized apartments were built around a large central courtyard that hosted shared events and housed public services: a post office, kindergarten, grocery store, etc. These aspects of the complex evoked a comparison to the *kibbutz*.

In the early 1930s Modernism became the normative style of residential architecture in Tel Aviv.⁶ It also dominated the public space, Dizengoff Square being the most prominent example. Modernism, or rather a certain blend of Modernist elements, practically became the vernacular of Tel Aviv, where there was a paucity of means but a wealth of forms. This Modernism emanated not only from the Bauhaus-trained architects but also those who had studied elsewhere in Europe: Genia Averbuch (*École des Beaux-arts*, Brussels), Joseph Neufeld and Karl Robin (Vienna School of Architecture), Ze'ev Rechter (*École des Ponts et Chaussées*, Paris), Werner Wittkower (Berlin and Stuttgart), et al. Alongside the functionalist cubes that characterized Walter Gropius' buildings, Tel Aviv boasted the poetic curved lines of Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953). The influence of

Le Corbusier (1887–1965) was also imprinted on the city: a few of Tel Aviv's architects had worked for him (Sam Barkai and Shlomo Bernstein), and others, like Ze'ev Rechter (1899–1960), had clearly absorbed his concepts.

The “White City”— Tel Aviv's Modernist heritage

In the all-new city of Tel Aviv, the impact of Modernism was not truly felt until the major wave of immigration from Germany, which brought clients with European taste as well as architects who could satisfy them. Commissioned in 1925 by the mayor, Meir Dizengoff, Patrick Geddes outlined a garden city plan for Tel Aviv in keeping with the boundaries set by the British Mandate government. Patrick Geddes' plan called for residential urban blocks, where every home was placed within a garden. A public building or park at the center of each block served the residents. Within a decade, an extensive and homogeneous Modernist environment emerged,⁷ incorporating Modernist architecture within Patrick Geddes' city blocks and setting the pattern for Tel Aviv's unique urban and architectural fabric.

No less important than this built heritage is the visual and written material about Tel Aviv produced by its contemporaries and preserved for decades in the yellowing pages of local and foreign magazines, architectural photographs, propaganda posters, and depictions in art and literature. In 1932 Israel's famous poet Nathan Alterman declared (in *Ha'aretz*):

Because I loved being a drifted grain in the Niagara Falls of roads and sidewalks ... Because Tel Aviv must grow, to be like its distant sisters, desert-elicited, and desert-eliminating, alien and loved, full of people and heroic beauty. City! Concrete jungle, electricity and iron...⁸

According to Alterman, Tel Aviv was destined to be a major city; like her “distant sisters” she was both stranger and lover, closely linked to the circle of great cities around the world. Like other poets and artists, Alterman addressed the whiteness of the Modernist buildings, and on occasion described Tel Aviv as a “White City”.

An exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum in 1984, marking the city's 75th anniversary, was a landmark for the historiography of Israeli architecture. Entitled “White City”, the term has become the standard tag for the Modernist City.⁹ The narrative of the White City crossed the threshold into art, academic literature, and popular imagination.¹⁰

Modernist architecture in local mythologies

When Modernism arrived in Tel Aviv, the city already had its origin “myth”: a new town, born out of the sands, spontaneously fulfilling the dream of producing a society both Jewish and modern. How was Modernist architecture assimilated into the myth of Tel Aviv? Modernism's attraction was, perhaps, that it conformed to the town's — and Zionism's — general belief in modernity. In fact, it provided the visual imagery for modernity as it was promoted in posters and book illustrations.



01 Aerial view of Tel Aviv's center with Dizengoff circle, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1945
© Government photo archives.



02 Arieh Sharon, Hod workers housing, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1931-1935, communal courtyard © Marina Epstein-Pliouchitch and Talia Abramovich photograph, 2019.

However, the celebration of architectural style belonged to professionals, not to the general public. Lively debate of the issues took place among Tel Aviv's architects. In the 1920s, a Society of Engineers & Architects began functioning. Of special note was the group of architects known as "the Circle". They promoted Modernist concepts in their magazine, *HaBinyan* (*The Building*, 1937-1938), which is an invaluable source of the architectural history of Tel Aviv.

The "Jewish Modernism" in Palestine in general and Tel Aviv in particular soon garnered international attention. There was a conscious attempt, in fact, to "market" local Modernism through international periodicals. In 1937 two Tel Aviv architects, Julius Posener (1904-1996) and Sam Barkai (1889-1975), edited an issue of *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* dedicated to Palestine. Sam Barkai had worked briefly in Le Corbusier's office in 1933, and Sam Barkai may have introduced him to the cooperative settlement projects in Palestine. Julius Posener also published a paper on the subject in a German journal.

By the end of the 1940s the Modernism of the previous decade had entered the annals of history. After the creation of the state of Israel, the state took the lead in the country's development and construction. A new generation of young, native-born architects cornered the field, and post-war Brutalist Modernism rapidly replaced the ethos of classic Modernism.

Meanwhile, the historical fabric of Tel Aviv came to be regarded as old and out-dated. The buildings of the 1930s slowly began to deteriorate in the salty, humid air of the Mediterranean coast. The commercial density grew larger than the original design permitted, and the quality of life eroded. Sections of 1930s Tel Aviv became a Modernist *città vecchia*.

The Modernist heritage of Tel Aviv was not explicitly celebrated in the 1970s. In the popular mind, its architectural style came to be defined, mistakenly, as "Bauhaus". The epithet has since caused no end of confusion, compounded by the above-mentioned "White City" exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum in 1984. Curated by Israeli art and

architectural historian Michael Levin, the show dramatized the uniqueness of Tel Aviv's Modernist architecture and instantaneously produced the mythological "White City" of Tel Aviv.¹¹ The title caught the public's fancy,¹² and the UNESCO declaration of 2003 accepted it as a matter of fact. Since then this "White City" has been awarded a plethora of new sobriquets: "Bauhaus City", "Tel Aviv School", "Weissenhof School", "Ayalon City", and more.

Bauhaus and resilience

Tel Aviv, Israel's central metropolis, is dynamic, vibrant and desirable. However, the rapidly rising value of its real estate and growth of its population put historic buildings at risk. As has been pointed out previously in our *Planning Perspectives* paper, the resilience and durability of buildings and open spaces stems from their design and capability to absorb functional changes, facilitating a wider range of uses and activities.¹³ In other words, the resilience of contemporary urban spaces "derives from their adaptable nature and their ability to address the needs of a multi-cultural society".¹⁴ The resilience of Tel Aviv's urban fabric and architecture resulted from both physical and spiritual strength. The design of its historic buildings provided flexibility that has left room for adjustments to suit the needs of today's population. New functions have been added, advanced building systems installed, and interiors have been opened up and re-divided. These physical changes have been carried out for the most part with minimal alterations to the Modernist exteriors.

The city's spiritual resilience was a cumulative construct. In 1994, before the conference "International Style in Tel Aviv", initiated by Michael Levin and Nitza Szmuk¹⁵ and jointly sponsored by UNESCO and the municipal authorities, a public survey revealed that few citizens recognized the term "International Style", though many were familiar with "Bauhaus Style".¹⁶ Popularly, the Israeli public clearly identified the "White City" as the "Bauhaus City", associating old Tel Aviv's architectural style with the well-known Bauhaus. Despite this historical inaccuracy,



03 Arieh Sharon, Hod workers housing, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1931 - 1935
© Azrieli Architectural Archive, The Arieh Sharon Collection, 1960s.



04 Genia Averbuch, Zina Dizengoff circle, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1934
© The Central Zionist archives (CZA), Jerusalem, 1938.

05 Yehuda Megidovitch and Rafael Megiddo, Esther cinema, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1938 - 1939, Reuse into Cinema hotel
© Marina Epstein-Pliouchtch and Talia Abramovich photograph, 2019.



06 Arieh Sharon, Ohel theatre's conservation, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1937 - 9, Reuse into hotel
© Marina Epstein-Pliouchtch and Talia Abramovich photograph, 2019.

Tel Aviv's municipality adopted the voice of the people. The "Bauhaus City" myth granted Tel Aviv international stature while simultaneously underpinning and maintaining its resilience.

The spiritual resilience fostered by urban and architectural mythology overlaps physical resilience. Mythologies stimulate advertising, innovation, and financial investment. They attract people. Hence much of "Bauhaus City" has been preserved. Adaptive re-use has extended the life span of its buildings while keeping their cultural and spiritual significance intact.

Re-use has been a major element in the widespread conservation of many Modernist apartments and public buildings in Tel Aviv. A good example is the Ohel Theater, planned by Arieh Sharon in 1937–1939, which is currently being converted into a hotel. Of singular physical, spiritual and mythological importance, the Ohel Theater was designed by the Bauhaus architect as a "Socialist Theater" for the working class. In 1940, a local newspaper noted its architect's European training and proclaimed that the theater building was the physical realization of "Berlin dreams", comparing it to the German capital's Schiller Theater.¹⁷ The comment was guaranteed to enhance the building's significance and status, which it maintains to this day.

Conclusion

21st century Tel Aviv is constantly growing in height and depth. A wall of skyscrapers has been erected next to Modernist buildings, and its high-rise business district is as impressive as any large city's. Yet with all her ethos of modernity, Tel Aviv never again generated anything as unique and fresh as the Modernism of the 1930s. Through the constant reinvention of its myths, Tel Aviv has given rise to urban and architectural resilience, which has allowed the preservation of its Modernist "Bauhaus City". One can only wonder what the city's next myth will be.

Notes

- 1 Nitza Szmuk, *Tel-Aviv's Modern Movement, The White City of Tel-Aviv a World Heritage Site*, Tel Aviv, Municipality of Tel Aviv-Yafo, 2004, 10.
- 2 Authors' interview with Michael Levin, September 2019.
- 3 See catalog and exhibition in Tel Aviv's museum curated by Eran Neuman, 2019.
- 4 Arieh Sharon, *Bauhaus+kibbutz*, Tel Aviv, Massada, 1976.
- 5 See Marina Epstein, 1998.
- 6 Marina Epstein-Pliouchtch and Ron Fuchs, 2008.
- 7 Similar Modernist districts developed simultaneously in Mandate Palestine's other two major cities, Haifa and Jerusalem.
- 8 *Ha'aretz*, 16.11.1932, Drawings, A free translation made by authors.
- 9 The exhibition was curated by Michael Levin.
- 10 For example, Alona Nitzan-Shifan, "Contested Zionism - Alternative Modernism: Erich Mendelsohn and the Tel Aviv Chug in Mandate Palestine", *Architectural History*, Vol. 39, 1996, 147-180; Rotbard, Arieh Sharon, *White City, Black City*, Tel Aviv, Babel, 2005 [Hebrew]. The "White City" connotation is also applied to the business level. For example, Tel Aviv's town villa (Zilberstein House), built in 1947, was converted into a boutique hotel and given the name "White house".
- 11 On the genealogy of the epithet "White City" see Maoz, Azariahu, *Tel Aviv, the Mythical City, A Historical Mythography*, Beer Sheba, 2005 [Hebrew].

- 12 Yona, Fischer, *Tel Aviv: 75 Years of Art*, Tel Aviv, Massada, 1984.
- 13 Based on Carmona, Matthew, Heath, Tim, Taner, Oc, and Steven Tiesdell, *Public Places, Urban Spaces*, Oxford, Oxford Architectural Press, 2003, 203.
- 14 Talia Abramovich, Marina Epstein-Pliouchtch and Iris Aravot, "Imported Modernity and Local Design: The Creation of Resilient Public Spaces in Late Ottoman Palestine, 1878-1918", *Planning Perspectives* (online version), 2018.
- 15 Nitza Szmuk, the municipal conservation architect (1990–2003).
- 16 Authors' interview with Michael Levin, September 2019.
- 17 *HaMashkif*, 31.1.1940.

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